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# THE Nation.

JUNE 29/JULY 6, 2020

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# Letters

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## Labour Agonistes

Re “After Corbyn, After Covid” by Gary Younge [June 1/8]: As an ex-Labour MP and ex-minister for Europe, I would like to qualify the conventional wisdom from him that the UK chose “to leave the European Union in a referendum. A significant section of the [Labour Party] insisted that people didn’t know what they were doing and should vote again.”

It’s true that about one in three of the UK’s registered voters fell for a populist, xenophobic, immigrant-bashing Brexit campaign in 2016.

But in Labour seats in the North—and I represented one for 18 years—while the totality voted for Brexit, most identifiable Labour voters did not. To put it another way, while I rarely got more than 50 percent of the vote, it was enough to make me an MP; racists from the anti-Semitic British National Party or the xenophobic UK Independence Party, as well as the European-hating Tories, split the remainder. When it came to the Brexit plebiscite, which was largely a referendum on immigration, Labour seats but not all Labour voters supported the hate politics whipped up by Boris Johnson in the manner of Donald Trump. But please don’t depict millions of decent working-class Labour voters as anti-immigrant xenophobes. That cliché is simply wrong.

Not all but most of Labour’s 500,000 members wanted to take the fight to the Tories. More than

1 million people marched in London against Brexit last year urging a second vote. Alas, party leader Jeremy Corbyn had not changed his EU-hostile views since the 1970s, a time of left hostility to European partnership.

He boycotted the protests against the rabidly anti-European Tories and their backers in the Murdoch press. The party was confused and demoralized as a result. Corbyn was unelectable for other reasons, notably his appearances on platforms with rabid Jew-haters and various terror outfits and a sense he wasn’t a patriot.

Since 2018 there has been a narrow majority against rupturing links with Europe, as confirmed by the May 2019 European Parliament elections. Sadly, Labour could not speak for the anti-isolationists in Britain because of very poor quality leadership from 2016 to ’19.

DENIS MACSHANE  
LONDON

## Younge Responds

Denis MacShane perfectly illustrates the two conceits that alienated Labour from much of its base and kept the party divided. First, he infantilizes the broader electorate, assuming to know better than the people what they voted for when they voted to leave the EU. Like him, I backed Remain. But it’s not plausible to support democracy only when democracy supports you. It suggests contempt and breeds the very cynicism that leads to disaffection

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## The Outrage Must Not End

**L**ike all black parents, I believe that talking to my children about the protests surrounding the death of George Floyd also involves contextualizing the current struggle against police brutality within the generations-long struggle for equal rights. I need my sons to know that the fight they see

on television is part of a larger struggle that started long before they were born and that they must take up after I am gone.

This week I told my older son, a sensitive 7-year-old, that his grandmother participated in protests when she was not much older than he is now. I told him that she, too, faced police brutality and that one day it would be his turn to fight this battle.

But my kid is just a kid. He listened to my family history lesson, yet when thinking about his role in this story, he was optimistic as only a child can be. He told me cheerfully, "Maybe this time will be the last time."

This time will not be the last time. This will not be the last time the police brutally murder an unarmed black civilian. This will not be the last time that murder is captured on camera. It will not be the last time that black people take to the streets to demand justice or that cops respond to those demands with even more violence and brutality. It will not be the last time that mayors and other local officials make excuses for police violence.

The past few weeks have opened some eyes to the systemic brutality faced by black people. But for things to get better for my kids, people will have to maintain their energy and their demands for police reform over the next few weeks. And months. And years. The system of white supremacy enforced and protected by the American police was not built in a day, and it will not be dismantled in a day. What will people be prepared to do two weeks from now to make the world safer for black people than it was two weeks ago? What will they be prepared to do in two months? In two years?

Already, the infrastructure is in place for this country to ignore police brutality the moment everybody stops shouting about it. Despite the general unrest, politicians from both parties have offered a steady stream of excuses for the police

brutality being inflicted, ironically, on people demonstrating against police brutality. There is not enough space to list all the atrocities we've seen on video in just the past few weeks, but they include cops driving cars into people, cops beating nonviolent protesters with sticks, cops firing tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at protesters at point-blank range, military units galloping at unarmed civilians so the president can do a photo op, and cops pushing an elderly man to the ground and stepping past his body as he bled from his skull.

The media, too, is laying the groundwork to ignore police brutality as soon as possible. Despite video evidence that directly contradicts police reports, the media still presents the official justifications for police violence in order to offer "both sides" of the story. News anchors still manage to generate more outrage over property destruction than they do over the teargassing and arrest of journalists. And publications still print op-eds calling for the armed forces to be deployed against US citizens.

The current scrutiny has produced some accountability. The cops in Buffalo who assaulted the elderly man have been charged. The editor who headed the section and defended the op-ed threatening Americans with military violence has resigned. When everybody is watching, some people can do the right thing.

But 57 other cops in Buffalo resigned from that special unit (though not from the police force) to protest those two officers being held to account. And while one editor lost his job, many, many more remain committed to the idea that white supremacist logic should be given equal time and legitimacy in the marketplace of ideas.

A few weeks from now, those officers and that editor will have melted back into the establishment.






# 91%

Share of those arrested in New York City for violating coronavirus guidelines who are black or Hispanic

# 20x

Increased likelihood, from 2010 to 2012, for a black male teenager in the US to be shot and killed by police, compared with a white one, according to ProPublica

# 2.6x

Increased likelihood for a black person in the US to be arrested for marijuana possession, versus a white one

# 1,356

Racial profiling complaints filed with the Los Angeles Police Department from 2012 to 2014

# 0

Number of those complaints upheld by the LAPD

# 54%

Share of people who thought burning down a Minneapolis police building was fully or partly justified

—Daniel Fernandez

Will a cop think twice about killing an unarmed black man in the future? Will a reporter think twice before uncritically quoting a police report about that murder? The protests have raised awareness, but will new allies maintain the vigilance needed to see systemic change come to fruition?

Or will people get distracted? After all, we're in the midst of a pandemic, with unemployment approaching Great Depression levels, while being led by a racist authoritarian liar in an election year. In a few weeks, those issues will be back at the forefront of American consciousness.

Until the next time an unarmed black person is killed by police on camera. And the time after that. And the time after that. Eventually, it will be my sons' turn to protest the fact that this problem everybody is aware of still hasn't been solved.

All I can hope is that when it's my sons' turn to take to the streets and demand justice for a victim of police brutality, the name that he's chanting isn't mine.

ELIE MYSTAL

## Durham Isn't Burning

*But don't light a match.*

Sitting on my deck a few miles from downtown Durham, N.C., I waited for the city to burn. I scanned the sky for telltale darkening. Listened for keening sirens. Watched my social media for uprisings in progress. And periodically sniffed the air for evidence of municipal char.

But the only smoke that wafted to me snaked from my friend's Black & Mild, and Twitter brought no images of SWAT teams. Protesters in the city held forth for days on end. They blocked traffic downtown and chanted names, including that of George Floyd, the North Carolina-born Minneapolis man killed when a police officer knelt on his neck for a fatal eight minutes and 46 seconds.

In Durham, law enforcement was present and watchful, but from a distance. It was a different scene from the one playing out in Raleigh, the nearby capital, where on May 30 police responded to a large protest with a reprehensible flex of militarized power, firing tear gas and pepper spray into a largely peaceful crowd estimated at around 1,000 protesters. Over three days, about 30 of them were charged with trespassing, resisting arrest, property damage, or public disturbance.

By contrast, Durham Sheriff Clarence Birkhead—the first black sheriff in county history, elected in a 2018 wave that installed six first-ever African American sheriffs in their respective areas—wrote in a May 29 letter to the media, “As a law enforcement leader, I am embarrassed, and outraged, at the behavior of a few officers who fail to demonstrate the professionalism and humanity required to protect and serve our diverse communities. No matter how hard I try, I simply cannot understand how these incidents continue to occur and those officers responsible seemingly go unpunished.”

Yeah, me neither, Clarence. On the one hand, that's

textbook bad-apple rhetoric. But on June 1, he released another statement: “I am proud of these men and women from all races and backgrounds and how they came together to peacefully let their voices be heard regarding needed change in the criminal justice system. The system is not perfect, it is not equitable for all, and it is in need of reform.”

I view such statements with journalistic and citizenly skepticism. But Durham law enforcement has simultaneously stood down and stood up. Birkhead, Police Chief C.J. Davis, and Mayor Steve Schewel had a June 5 meeting to talk about racism, relations with law enforcement, and poverty in the city with activists who demanded a meeting after blocking a local freeway. The meeting drew some ire when community members were turned away. Longtime activist and Durham resident Lamont Lilly was not there. And didn't want to be. He was in similar meetings with public officials five years ago—albeit with different leadership—and describes such meetings as “Kumbaya sessions, an attempt to cool us down, identify the leaders, and make friends. Make some concessions, go out for coffee and shit. If you cool the leaders down, you ultimately cool the whole movement down.”

Nonetheless, this approach has probably not earned Birkhead brownie points with the conservative-leaning North Carolina Sheriffs' Association. Some of its members supported a return to church services in a state where coronavirus cases are climbing and looked the other way when religious gatherings flouted shelter-in-place orders. If only they'd ignore protesters the way they ignored the armed white men (one with a supposedly inactive rocket launcher and two other guns visible on his person) who roamed downtown Raleigh on May 9, stopping to eat at a Subway and to harass a black couple strolling with their children.

*The absence of mass arrests, looting, and police-initiated violence is not peace.*

I recognize the tightrope that Birkhead must be walking and don't want to minimize the impact of law enforcement choosing affirmatively not to incite and inflame. Yet I don't want to give Durham's police officers undue credit or a cookie for doing what law enforcement should already do: enable Americans to express discontent, pursue deescalation as a matter of policy, and refrain from using violence. More important, we can't ignore the herculean labor of the activists who organized and talked one another through and down from righteous rage. And call me cynical, but it's also easier for police to be nonviolent when there's a goodly number of wholesome-looking white folks, not your bearded Proud Boys or cap-backward instigators, among the marchers.

But the absence of mass arrests, looting, and police-initiated violence is not peace, and the idea that there are peaceful protests and then violent ones is a simplistic binary. Durham didn't burn, but all is not well.

I think back to December 2013, when 17-year-old Jesus Huerta died, reportedly from a self-inflicted gunshot, in the back of a police cruiser. Police dispersed protesters with tear gas then.

COMMENT



I think back to August 2017, when activists tore down the Confederate statue that fronted Durham's old courthouse. The city waited for a Klan rally in response, an event that never happened.

Many things did happen, however, and went unreported. The city was teeming with homegrown and traveling white supremacists, ready to foment race rumbles. On a reporting trip to the courthouse, I was followed by an elderly wild-eyed white heckler who asked me repeatedly when I was going to cook him breakfast. Two elderly black men sheltered in a nearby doorway despite near 100-degree temperatures and assured me they were watching me—and him. I was sure all three were packing heat. A friend was mistaken for a tall guitar-playing black man in a video of the statue's toppling and questioned.

Another resident, coming back from a band rehearsal the night of the Klan march that wasn't, was stopped by a car with a blue light and men wearing generic, suspect uniforms. They wouldn't show their badges. The driver floored it and sped away, not knowing if he was a target of real but rogue officers or white supremacist impersonators. After all, in Durham, black male drivers are far more likely than whites to be pulled over, day or night.

This in our Durham, a kinda "Chocolate City." More than a third of the residents are black. African-American political leadership has been comfortably ensconced here for long enough that electing a white mayor here in 2017 was a distinct change. The black middle class has its businesses, bachelor's degrees, and fancy balls. And with a burgeoning population of immigrant neighbors and Latinx newcomers who relocated from other states, black and brown people now outnumber whites. None of those demographics erase or fully mitigate the inequality inscribed on the landscape. The Durham Freeway bisects the city; from the late 1960s to the early '70s, its construction sliced through vibrant black neighborhoods and business districts. A Whole Foods Market, so busy that its parking lot is the city's fender-bender epicenter, anchors one end of Main Street. The other end terminates in East Durham's food desert. Duke University occupies prime real estate in the city center; you can walk around the stone wall that circles its East Campus. But the \$60,000 annual undergraduate tuition tops the 2014–18 median household income of about \$56,000.

Until a recent spate of development, the county jail loomed as one of the tallest buildings on downtown's edge. You can buy a luxury condo in its shadow and have incarcerated people as neighbors you'll never meet. Those slick condos are going up at a breakneck pace alongside hipster hotels, breweries, and Brutalist modern houses that remind us that our inner-city neighborhoods have appealingly cheap real estate. The Bull City is no longer the Bull Shitty of a decade ago, the dysfunctional blacker stepchild wedged between seemingly bucolic Chapel Hill and Raleigh's suburban sprawl. And despite local opposition, it has a newish \$71 million police headquarters.

It's no coincidence that eviction filings proliferate here. The Durham Human Relations Commission reported 10,000 in both 2016 and 2017. The boom that makes downtown a delightfully gritty destination—a place white people once feared to tread—had to be someone's bust. In March new eviction proceedings were paused because of the pandemic. As the courts crank back up, padlocks will be going on doors across the city and county again, and sheriff's deputies will be the ones escorting people from the homes they've lost. Given the hemorrhaging of jobs, evictions will probably rise above the 2016 level of about eight households a day.

Durham may not be in flames. But it's smoldering.

CYNTHIA GREENLEE

*Cynthia Greenlee, PhD, is a journalist and historian based in North Carolina. Her work is available at [cynthiagreenlee.com](http://cynthiagreenlee.com).*

## Holding Police to Account

*What's missing is political will.*

**I**n the midst of a historic, nationwide uprising after the police lynching of George Floyd and after more than a week of outsize police aggression against protesters across the country, the New York Police Department suddenly found itself on its knees. On May 31, a Sunday, Deputy Inspector Vincent Tavalaro and several other officers were pictured taking a knee with protesters in the borough of Queens. Elected officials across the city and state followed suit with streams of public statements and social media salvos condemning the brutality against both Floyd and the protesters.

But the posturing and rhetoric of police and elected officials in New York stand in stark contrast with their actions. There is a through line that connects police brutality to the elected officials who seek to avoid doing the hard things required to protect their black and brown constituents from police terror.

In the wake of Floyd's killing, a number of reforms have been put forward. The NAACP has called on Minneapolis to bar police from using the type of restraint that was used to kill Floyd, a Colorado bill would ban choke holds and require all police to wear body cameras, a bipartisan group of senators is pushing to end the military-to-police pipeline that has funneled military-grade equipment to law enforcement agencies across the country, and politicians from the local to the national level are calling to defund or radically transform police departments. In New York our organization, the Working Families Party, is fighting to repeal 50-a, a statute that shields police misconduct records from public view. But none of this stands a chance if politicians continue to do what they've done for decades: issue statements about police violence but kill any legislation that would threaten the status quo.

On the final weekend of May alone, numerous videos went viral of outrageous actions by police officers directed at protesters in New York City. On Friday an officer was recorded shoving a woman so hard that she fell to the ground and hit her head, resulting in a seizure that required medical attention. And on Saturday, in an action that could have had fatal consequences, two NYPD SUVs plowed into a group of protesters. As troubling as these events are, they are not aberrations. Brutality, militarism, and overpolicing are standard operating procedure for a police department whose massive budget was permitted (by a Democratic mayor and a Democratic-controlled City Council) to surpass those of the Health, Homeless Services, Housing Preservation and Development, and Youth and Community Development departments.

The inconvenient truth for kneeling NYPD officers and outraged elected officials is this: Condemning an egregious and barbaric murder somewhere else is far easier than finding the political will to actually enact change in your own backyard. When it comes to addressing police violence and accountability, city and state elected officials have not only fallen down on the job; they've fed the beast of overpolicing and mass incarceration, putting black and brown New Yorkers directly in harm's way.

In 2019, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo decided to crack down on fare evasion, deploying 500 additional officers to

*(continued on page 8)*

COMMENT

Eric Alterman



# The *Times* They Are a-Changin'

*Opinion editors can't play both sides when one side is fascism.*

**T**he Trump administration and its Republican enablers are fighting a series of wars directed at targets inside the United States. A partial list would include immigrants, African Americans, Jews, poor people, middle-class people, people with student loan debts, the environment, voting rights, fair elections, blue-state taxpayers, the rule of law, honest elections, and all forms of accountability for Donald Trump, his family, and the criminals who helped him get elected. Because these are by and large unpopular causes, and it is the job of the press to let the public know what is going on, journalists are also a necessary, if ancillary, target. That explains Trump's frequent use of the phrase "enemies of the people," which had been the go-to charge of dictators and mass murderers, as well as his incessantly parroted mantra "fake news."

Those running the country's elite media institutions have no experience with a situation like this and still cannot figure out how to handle it. Historically, media machers have seen themselves as collaborators with government officials to ensure that things run smoothly for whoever is in power. They do this, in part, because they believe in the cause and, in part, to obtain access, quotes, and the public pretense of respect. When James Reston, who was then *The New York Times*' most influential columnist, published an op-ed in 1979 titled "By Henry Kissinger With James Reston," he did so not with shame but pride.

Reston was flacking for a man who directed a secret, unconstitutional war in Cambodia and Laos and illegally wiretapped journalists and the members of his own staff to determine who leaked the news to Reston's paper. US government officials, especially but not exclusively Republicans, have been lying to the American people about matters of life and death for a long time. The mainstream media eventually righted itself under President Richard Nixon's assault on our democratic institutions, but its ability to do so today under Trump, an even greater threat to American democracy, is considerably diminished. The reasons for this are complex. Some are economic, others technological. But during the present crisis, the biggest problem is that the leaders of the mainstream media cannot make up their minds about the fundamental question of the Trump presidency: "Which side are you on?"

The top editors of almost all of America's mainstream media institutions have explicitly rejected the notion of a journalism of opposition. While *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for instance, have tallied Trump's untruths—separate from the articles in which they are repeated verbatim—neither has proved willing to reconsider its commitment to the mindless both-sides style of reporting in which Republican lies and incitements to fascist violence are given equal weight to Democratic attempts to tell the truth and defend democracy.

Thanks to Trump's response to the protests against police brutality, however, the jig is up. Military leaders past and present and even a few Republicans have had enough. It is not OK for

Trump to demand a military attack on our own citizens and then lie about having done so. And yet at this moment, *New York Times* opinion editors offered American journalism's most prestigious real estate to Senator Tom Cotton to make the case for Trump's proposed assault.

The best case that could be made for the Cotton op-ed was its obvious crappiness. The piece was nothing but lies, half-truths, character assassination, and scare tactics. Anyone reading with a critical eye would have recognized his argument's weakness and dismissed it as deranged fascist propaganda. Had the *Times* defended its decision to publish the piece by explaining it was purely to expose the shoddiness of the Trump team's argument, it would have been a defensible position based on a degree of respect for the intelligence of its readership. This is presumably the reason Russian President Vladimir Putin and Taliban deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani have appeared on the op-ed page as well.

But that is not what happened. The paper's editorial page editor, James Bennet, followed by its publisher, A.G. Sulzberger, initially justified the piece in terms of the op-ed page's traditional (and laudable) commitment to diversity of opinion. They acknowledged the piece's weaknesses only after an unprecedented online rebellion by the paper's reporters and contributors, led by African American staffers who felt that its publication put their lives in danger. Bennet resigned after admitting that he had not read the piece in advance, and the deputy in charge, James Dao, was reassigned. Given the regular appearances on the page of former *Wall Street Journal* opinion editors Bret Stephens and Bari Weiss, it's no wonder that the 25-year-old Adam Rubenstein—also an alumnus of the *Journal* (and *The Weekly Standard*)—who edited and shepherded the piece onto the *Times*' website despite objections from a photo editor, did not recognize its awfulness or dangerousness. But therein lies the problem. The paper cannot decide which side it's on.

We know which side Cotton's on. In addition to calling on Twitter for the military to attack protesters with "no quarter"—that is, committing the war crime of massacring captured troops even if they surrender—he also once urged the Department of Justice to "prosecute [reporters and an editor at the *Times*] to the fullest extent of the law" for an article revealing a US intelligence program to track the financial activities of suspected terrorist networks. He was for many years a protégé of *Weekly Standard* founder William Kristol, who, in his previous, pre-woke incarnation, similarly opined, "I think it is an open question whether the *Times* itself should be prosecuted" for what he termed a "totally gratuitous revealing of an ongoing secret classified program that is part of the war on terror." Kristol was rewarded for this with a regular spot on the op-ed page.

I don't doubt the *Times* editors' good faith in seeking to expose readers to points of view they might not otherwise encounter. But more than three years into the Trump presidency, given the threats we face, it is long past time for editors to stop playing both sides with fascism and democracy.







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(continued from page 5)

patrol the New York City subway system at an estimated cost of \$249 million over the next four years. As *The New Republic* reported, the predictable results of aggressively tracking people who avoided paying the \$2.75 fare were “riders—particularly black riders—being tackled and tased over the cost of a subway ride.”

Before the uprising, 2020 brought more of the same. January kicked off with elected officials and other bad actors leading a propaganda campaign to roll back historic bail reform legislation, which eliminated cash bail for most misdemeanors and nonviolent felony charges. The rollback, championed by Cuomo and New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, will see more state residents stuck in jail for pretrial detention while there are few signs of the Covid-19 pandemic slowing down.

As the coronavirus tore through New York’s prisons, black and brown New Yorkers on the outside weren’t spared from the twin structures of racist policing practices and the pandemic. Thirty-five of the 40 people arrested in late March and early May on social distancing violations in Brooklyn were black. One confrontation, captured on camera, saw an officer use a stun gun to arrest a man.

The response of de Blasio, who famously ran against his predecessor’s stop-and-frisk policy in his first bid for the office, has been particularly disappointing. On May 30, he offered a defense of the officers who drove their SUVs into the protesters. He went out of his way to reach into the minds of the officers behind the wheel, telling the public they had no choice because the potentially fatal encounter “was created by a group of protesters blocking and surrounding a police vehicle.” The mayor lauded the department’s restraint.

*The best practice to curb police violence is to reduce the number of interactions with the police.*

He has since attempted to walk back this apologism for NYPD violence, but de Blasio’s tepid words are in stark contrast with his tweets after Floyd’s horrific lynching. “This nation has devalued the lives of Black men for centuries,” de Blasio tweeted on May 28. “It has to end. And it will only end when there are consequences for those who do wrong. These officers need to be charged immediately.”

The mayor’s rhetoric is out of touch with the reality in his city. It took five years for the NYPD to fire Officer Daniel Pantaleo for the on-camera killing of Eric Garner, who was choked to death for selling loose cigarettes from packs without a tax stamp.

That contrast between statements and actions underscores what’s missing in the conversation about police accountability or the oft-dreaded talk of reform: political will. There can be no police accountability that protects black and brown communities without it. However, like all things, it begins with the demands of the people. It includes not retaining politicians like de Blasio who run on reform measures and then fail to deliver. It includes holding elected officials’ feet to the fire when the messaging machine insists on accountability measures that do not work. In previous years, antibias training and outfitting police with body cameras used to pass as significant reform. Today, we know that body cameras do not curb violent behavior by police and footage often doubles as snuff films of those killed by officers. We know that despite sinking millions of dollars into antibias training, the effectiveness of that training is also questionable. These “best practices” were implemented in Minneapolis before Floyd’s death, but we know the real best practice to curb police violence is to reduce the number of interactions people have with police.

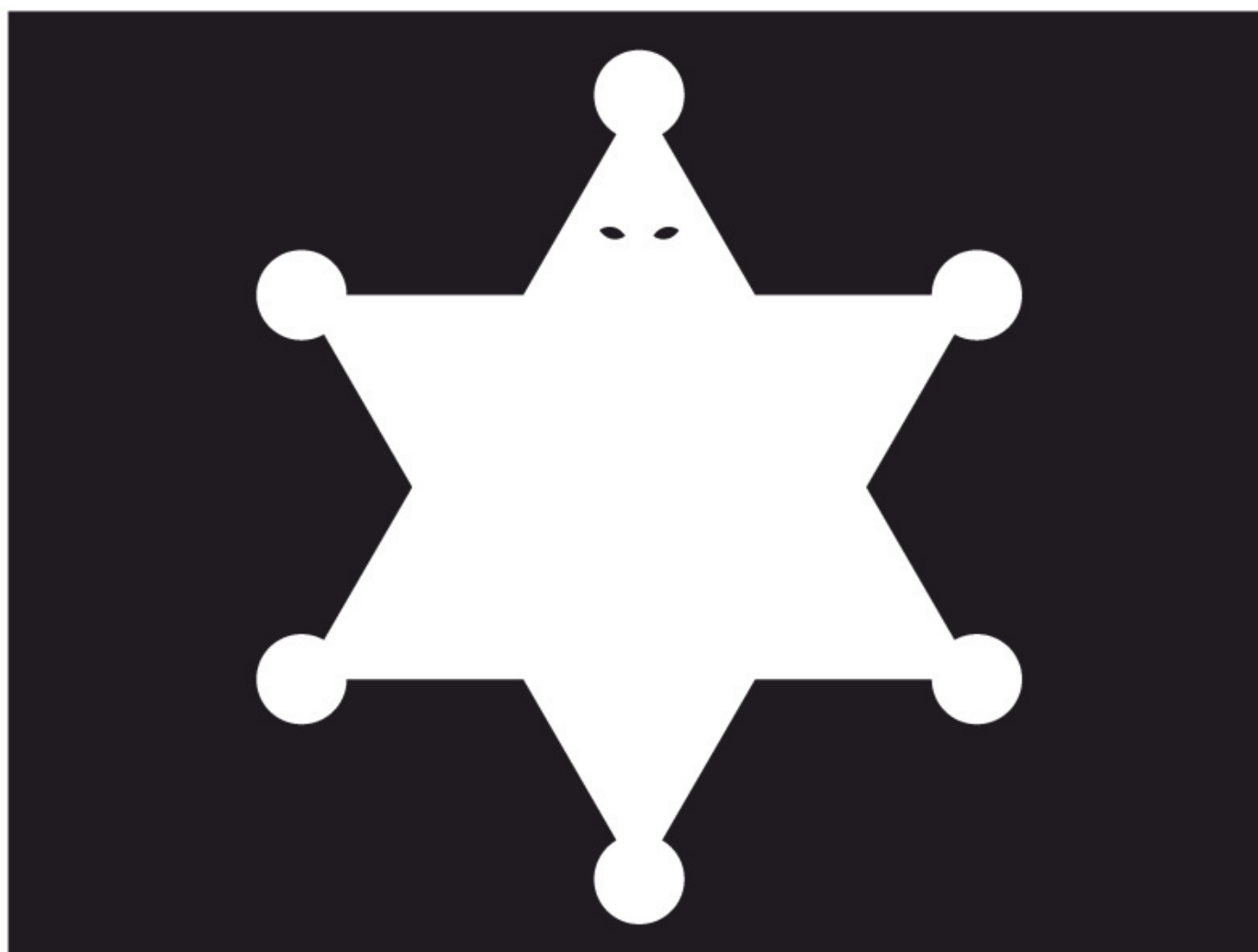
Political will means pushing candidates from the moment they declare their intention to run. We need to push all aspiring officials to refuse money from police unions and to move them away from language centering police “reform” and toward the language of overhaul. There is no reason youth programs, education, mental health services, and affordable housing are consistently on the chopping block while the police retain their bloated budgets. We have all the evidence we need that divesting in policing and investing in community initiatives like violence interruption programs is the way forward. Now we need elected officials with the political will to make it happen.

MAURICE MITCHELL AND SOCHIE NNAEMEKA

*Maurice Mitchell is the national director of the Working Families Party. Sochie Nnaemeka is the party’s New York state director.*

## COMIX NATION

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## TAKE ACTION

# Fund the Uprising

**A**fter the police murdered George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other black Americans, people took to the streets across the US to protest police brutality. In response, militarized law enforcement, in some cases with the help of the National Guard, violently attacked and arrested demonstrators, often holding them in packed jails in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. At this moment of uprising, *The Nation* encourages readers to support bail funds and organizations working to fight police terrorism.

Many bail funds have reached their targets, but these are still seeking donations: the Nashville Community Bail Fund, the New Orleans Safety and Freedom Fund, the Northwest Community Bail Fund in Seattle, the Richmond Community Bail Fund in Virginia, and the Free the 350 Bail Fund, which prioritizes “bailing out Black people incarcerated in...Dane County” in Wisconsin.

Organizations like Assata’s Daughters in Chicago, a “Black woman-led, young person-directed organization rooted in the Black Radical Tradition”; (F)empower, a group of “queer culture shifters creating a radical feminist awakening in Miami”; and Reclaim the Block, whose goal is to defund the police in Minneapolis and move that money to areas that promote health and safety, are also in need of support.

There has never been a better time to help sustain community-based initiatives that produce real security.

—Sara Baig



# Where the Violence Started

*There is a historical continuum connecting this moment to the very first slave patrols.*

**O**n any given day in recent weeks, it’s been possible to binge-watch a brand-new batch of videos documenting police attacking protesters with every tool in their (literal) arsenals. A New York City cop shoved a woman roughly half his size to the pavement so forcefully, she suffered a seizure and was hospitalized. In Texas a mounted police officer steered his horse into a crowd of demonstrators, nonchalantly trampling a woman in his path. Minneapolis police, from the comfort of their squad cars, conducted the drive-by pepper spraying of peaceful protesters in multiple instances. And cops in Iowa—like ones in Virginia, Texas, Colorado, California, and many other states—fired rounds of tear gas at protesters standing with their hands in the air and chanting, “Hands up, don’t shoot.”

Again and again, protesters demanding an end to police brutality have been met with brutality by police. The videos of law enforcement being unlawfully violent—including footage of cops in Buffalo pushing a 75-year-old white man to the ground and then falsely reporting that he “tripped and fell”—has proved what black folks and other marginalized communities have been saying for as long as policing has existed in this country: Cops not only lie about the harm they inflict on people; they lie frequently and brazenly, even when there is solid proof to the contrary. (These scenes also raise the question, If police are willing to commit this kind of over-the-top violence when they know they’re being filmed, what horrors must they carry out when they know their acts will go unseen?) Weeks of witnessing rampant law enforcement violence has finally succeeded in mainstreaming the idea of police abolition, something that seemed unthinkable—and which many suggested was laughable—even a couple of months ago.

And yet, against this backdrop of wanton police abuse, there has been no lack of pearl-clutching about the supposed violence of the protests. These critiques seem to rest on the idea that civilian attacks against big-box retail outlets, luxury boutiques, and other inanimate objects are somehow commensurate with the state-funded violence by armed officers against actual black bodies. (Yes, some small businesses were struck, too, but it’s critical that we not allow those targeting them to derail attention from racialized policing.) Tacit rhetorical

equivalences between lost commercial products and lost black lives reveal yet again how American racism and capitalism are inextricably intertwined. But this historic moment of nationwide uprisings also demonstrates how white institutional power decides what does and does not qualify as violence in this country—a standard resulting in a national ethos that defines the destruction of buildings as catastrophic but the literal snuffing out of black life by police as merely maintaining “law and order.”

It’s true that the footage of police attacking protesters has forced mainstream news writers bemoaning that the protests “turned violent” to clarify

that the initiators of said violence were the police. But those reports still ignore that the “violence” being laid at protesters’ feet began when a police officer used his knee to slowly and casually murder George Floyd, a killing that followed police firing eight bullets into Breonna Taylor as she slept and fatally unleashing their firepower on Tony McDade. The violence started when the justice system allowed the police

killers of Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Rekia Boyd to walk free.

In fact, the violence can be traced back to before this country’s founding. These United States are, quite literally, the spoils of genocidal violence against Indigenous people and the violence of forced black labor. A continuum of violence connects this moment to the first slave patrols. Since then, through overpolicing and mass incarceration, the criminal justice system has destroyed black communities. The carceral state has subjected black folks to what can only be labeled a brutal form of violence rendered invisible by the power given to agents of a white supremacist state.

And what about the steady drumbeat of violence issuing from the current president, who explicitly tells cops to rough up people during arrests; who repeats the white supremacist promise that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts”; who flexes historical white racist might by threatening today’s



*Civilian attacks on inanimate objects are not commensurate with state-funded violence against black bodies.*



protesters with “the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons”? Consider the violence in Bill Clinton’s decision to sign the 1033 Program, which fast-tracked the militarization of the police through the transfer of weapons of war from the US armed forces to the country’s street cops. The Obama administration imposed limits on the program, but in 2017, Trump revoked them with an executive order that jump-started the violent program anew.

Add to that the daily violence of American systems that are finely calibrated to ensure the rich and powerful remain that way. Which causes more irreparable harm: gutting big-box stores or looting an entire tax system to benefit billionaires who, while we’re on the subject, have gotten precipitously richer as the pandemic has caused unemployment claims to skyrocket? Which is more destructive: burning a building that can be rebuilt or a \$2 trillion stimulus package that overwhelmingly gives

cash to Americans who already possess more money than they can spend in a lifetime? Violence is a constant embedded in a staggering number of American policies that protect the interests of a tiny but powerful portion of this country. The same folks then create legislation that outlaws a particular brand of violence and disproportionately apply those laws against the most vulnerable. We’ve been living with an astounding amount of violence all this time. The state just calls it something else.

That’s the trick of American violence: It’s labeled so only when it threatens to upset the violence of America’s white supremacist hierarchical order. For those of us who care to see real progress, that means not being fooled by the term “violence” yet again. ■

*Kali Holloway is a journalist who has also written for The Daily Beast, The Guardian, and other outlets.*

*Which causes more irreparable harm: gutting big-box stores or looting an entire tax system to benefit billionaires?*

## SNAPSHOT /

LAYLAH AMATULLAH BARRAYN

# Mourning

During a memorial service for George Floyd in Minneapolis on June 4, a woman and child observe eight minutes and 46 seconds of silence to mark the amount of time Officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd’s neck.

## Calvin Trillin Deadline Poet

## TOUGH-TALKING TRUMP

If he’s so tough, one asks, why did he hunker  
Inside that White House armor-plated bunker?  
With protests peaceful, why did it make sense  
To build a fence around the White House fence?  
Because, perhaps, he must have shelter when  
Those bone spurs get to acting up again.



The Nation.

# MEATHEADS

How red meat became the red pill for the right.

EAMON WHALEN

**N**early a billion pounds of beef move through the JBS processing plant in Grand Island, Neb., every year. Except this year: Over the last two months, the company has had to slow production as meatpacking plants around the country have been roiled by coronavirus outbreaks.

In late March, Nebraska state health officials, fearing such outbreaks, urged Governor Pete Ricketts to temporarily close the plant.

After Ricketts rebuffed them, stories of missing hand sanitizer and soap, no personal protective gear, and insufficient safety precautions began to leak out of the plant, which as of April had 260 confirmed Covid-19 cases that can be tied back to it. It's difficult to know how many more among its 3,000 workers have been infected since then, because Ricketts has refused to disclose official plant numbers. Across the country, rural areas that contain meatpacking plants with outbreaks of Covid-19 have rates five times those of other rural areas.

In a daily briefing on April 23, Ricketts dismissed those who thought the largely immigrant meatpacking workers in his state deserved relief by warning, "Think about how mad people were when they couldn't get paper products."

President Donald Trump issued an executive order five days later recognizing meat as a "scarce and critical material essential to the national defense," adding that he would "ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans" under the Defense Production Act of 1950. Ricketts—undeterred by the outbreaks in his state and emboldened by the White House—issued a press release declaring May as Beef Month in Nebraska.

"Politically, this shows that meat is indispensable," said University of Notre Dame professor Joshua Specht,

whose 2019 book *Red Meat Republic* recounts the history of American beef production. "Shortages of meat will personalize the pandemic for everyone, and that is a major political problem when you're trying to say the country is open for business."

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the fragility of American supply chains, and nothing demonstrates that more acutely than the price spikes, depleted meat aisles, and imposed rationing on a food that we've come to expect in limitless quantities. The brutality of effectively sacrificing human beings to keep those aisles well stocked might be the breaking point in what was already the liveliest debate inside food: the future of beef in the American diet.

Industrial beef is the most polluting, the most carbon-emitting, and the most resource-intensive form of protein. A 2018 study published in the journal *Nature* recommended that the average US citizen cut beef consumption by 75 percent if we want to keep the global temperature rise to less than 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. In the context of Covid-19, University of Minnesota biologist Rob Wallace has made the connection between global industrial livestock farming and the proliferation of superviruses.

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*Eamon Whalen, a freelance journalist from Minneapolis, was a 2019 recipient of the 11th Hour Food and Farming Fellowship.*





**CHUCK**

**RIB**

**SIRLOIN**

**SHANK**

**BRISKET**

**SHORT  
RIB**

**TOP  
SIRLOIN**

**ROUND**

**SHANK**

**PLATE**

**FLANK**

**RUMP**





If you're reading this, you've probably already heard that you should be cutting down on beef. But Trump's and Ricketts's decisions show that with beef so embedded in American culture, it's not going anywhere without a fight.

**R**ICKETTS'S WARNING OF RIOTS IF BIG GOVERNMENT comes for our beef echoes the claim by former Trump adviser Sebastian Gorka that the Green New Deal is a harbinger of authoritarian communism. "They want to take away your hamburgers," he bellowed in a speech at the 2019 Conservative Political Action Conference. "This is what Stalin dreamt about but never achieved." Gorka made it explicit: To threaten the primacy of meat in the American diet is to threaten a pillar of what it means to be a free American.

Gorka's ravings about government-mandated burger confiscation sound like some nefarious plot by the same "postmodern cultural Marxists" decried by the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. In 2018 he revealed on the wildly popular *Joe Rogan Experience* podcast that he was following an extreme form of the now trendy high-fat, high-protein paleolithic and ketogenic diets: just beef and water. Thanks to the "carnivore diet," as he called it, Peterson said he'd lost 50 pounds, cured his 30-year gum disease, and seen his lifelong depression cease. "Meat, man—I'm telling you, meat," reads an endorsement of the diet beneath an Instagram photo of him solemnly cutting through a steak.

Peterson first emerged in the public consciousness after protesting a Canadian policy about observing gendered pronouns, which he claimed as evidence of creeping authoritarian rule. He subsequently rode that wave of free-speech martyrdom to a best-selling book, *12 Rules for Life*, full of banal self-help infused with social Darwinism. Peterson addresses feelings of real alienation in his audience, but instead of locating the structural sources of their misery, he harks back to an imaginary past when men could be men, before Western civilization became pre-

**JBS:** This Nebraska meatpacking plant processes nearly a billion pounds of beef a year—and is a Covid-19 hot spot for its workers.

**"Self-help gets trashed as an opiate of the masses. But very few dieters see themselves on an individual quest for bodily perfection."**

—Adrienne Rose Bitar



**Sebastian Gorka:** The former Trump adviser warned, "They want to take away your hamburgers."

occupied with social justice and feminism. In recent years he's become a kind of soothsayer for the mostly young white male demographic that is the subject of worried fascination in the current age of homegrown extremism.

It's been 30 years since Carol J. Adams's landmark *The Sexual Politics of Meat* connected the subjugation of animals with the subjugation of women. Studies have shown that men are less likely to embrace eco-friendly practices because we perceive them as feminine; a recent survey of men in the United States found that they were less likely to wear a protective face mask during the pandemic because they viewed them as a sign of weakness.

Peterson's promotion of the carnivore diet was met with scornful incredulity and ridiculed as a self-defeating attempt to own the libs. But defenders of the diet pushed back, reminding us that humans are meant to eat meat and that it provides essential nourishment in the wasteland of the standard American diet—defined by high-fructose corn syrup, refined grains, and industrial seed oils.

We shouldn't project our politics onto "people who are half-dead, trying to get their lives back." That's what his daughter, Mikhaila Peterson, 28, told me when I asked her about the politics of promoting an all-beef diet in the 21st century. She put her dad on the diet after it helped her with a crippling autoimmune disease and has since rebranded it as her very own Lion Diet.

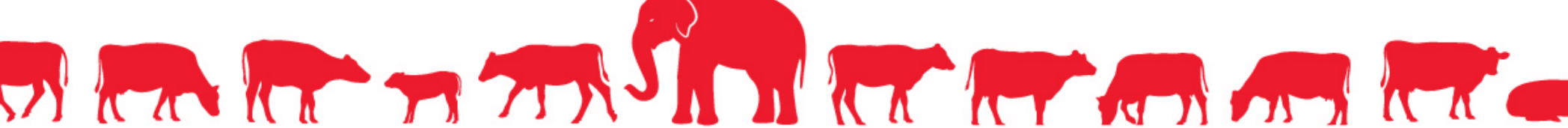
"You have to reach a certain level of desperation to try it," she admitted. "But because of how the media has been portraying Dad, the diet has been unfairly associated with the alt-right." Assigning people a conscious political identity based on their diet would be unwise; Adolf Hitler, famously, was a vegetarian.

But it would be equally unwise to ignore the embrace of red meat by the far right. Diet books were among the best-selling literature of the 20th century. More than simply offering guidance on which foods to eat and which to avoid, they remain a way to construct grand narratives about who we are. "Self-help gets trashed as being an opiate of the masses," said Adrienne Rose Bitar, the author of *Diet and the Disease of Civilization*. "But very few dieters see themselves on an individual quest for bodily perfection. Rather they recognize societal problems like obesity or diabetes and think that they're going to do their own small part, however impossibly, to create a better world."

Rogan and alt-right icons like Mike Cernovich and Alex Jones are already established in the dude self-care space, selling skin serums and supplements that might otherwise be considered ladylike. In recent years "soy boy" has eclipsed "cuck" as a term to deride the tofu-loving, beta-male archetype. The same return to a past, forgotten glory of men that is central to the appeal of people like Peterson and the nostalgic project of making America great again can also be found among advocates of low-carb regimes like the paleo, keto, and carnivore diets, which stress a return to the natural and traditional foodways of a healthier past.

Conservative radio host Dennis Prager's faux university PragerU released a video last year titled "How the Government Made You Fat," in which the "low-carb cardiologist" Bret Scher critiques the US Department of Agriculture's food pyramid. The anti-Big Government



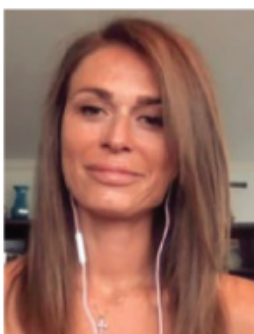


message is clear: You are responsible for your own health. Don't rely on the government to take care of you. For the One America News Network correspondent and former Pizzagate enthusiast Jack Posobiec and the far-right commentator Stefan Molyneux, praising meat-heavy, low-carb nutrition is a way to draw a contrast with the crypto-vegetarian piles of birdseed at the public schools their children attend, and Molyneux speculated it could be a communist plot. For others, eating meat is a way to police the boundaries of masculinity. In 2017 the far-right Canadian commentator Faith Goldy asked whether our fridges were the reason men were all of a sudden signing up for women's studies classes. Alex Jones's former sidekick Paul Joseph Watson wondered if soy was making Western men more likely to adopt left-wing beliefs. Anthony Johnson regularly hosts paleo nutritionists as part of his premier manosphere gathering, the 21 Convention.

Even the onetime steak salesman Trump did some nutritional virtue-signaling when it was revealed that he regularly enjoyed two Big Macs at dinner. His former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski quickly clarified to CNN that Trump "never ate the bread, which is the important part." The National Cattlemen's Beef Association—which lobbied for meatpacking plants to remain open during the pandemic—dispatched its former senior director of sustainable beef production research, Sara Place, to assure the conservative media host Glenn Beck that methane emissions from "cow farts" were "fake news" and that cattle "are part of the climate change solution."

Contemporary right-wing politics survives on a diet of grievance, persecution, and misdirection. In the right-wing mind, feminists and social justice warriors have been joined by the CEOs of Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat, creator of the Beyond Burger (the demand for alternative meat has skyrocketed but has not surpassed the demand for beef during the pandemic), Bill Gates, animal rights activists, Greta Thunberg, and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to carry water for the vegan agenda. "Modern society has created the least masculine men in history," reads one tweet by the Internet's mysterious self-described "meat philosopher" Carnivore Aurelius. Another proclaims, "The Carnivore Diet is the red pill that wakes you up to reality." In these circles, the war on meat is a war on men. Red meat is the red pill.

**E**VEN BEFORE THE current once-in-a-century public health crisis, it was an anxious time to try to eat healthy. Chronic afflictions like obesity, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes—commonly referred to as diseases of civilization—persist at rates bordering epidemic lev-



**Faith Goldy:** The fault is not in ourselves but in our fridges.



**Jordan Peterson:** He claims he lost 50 pounds and cured his depression and gum disease, thanks to a carnivore diet.

els. As populations around the world modernize and adopt something closer to the standard American diet, health outcomes worsen. Our understanding of nutrition hasn't helped.

The Australian historian Gyorgy Scrinis coined the term "nutritionism" for a paradigm that allows food corporations to rebrand and remarket ultraprocessed food as health food. In 2007 he identified a nutritional "loss of legitimacy" that had opened the door to the construction of new nutritional worldviews.

The paleo diet (the defining diet of the era, according to Bitar) is one example. Drawing on evolutionary biology and the caveman mystique, paleo mimics what was supposedly available to preagricultural humans, with a meat-heavy, grain-free, minimally processed diet. It's what we ate before "everyone's health went to shit," to quote John Durant, the author of *The Paleo Manifesto*. The framing is instructive. All diet plans are an attempt to mediate the transition from an agricultural, pastoral lifestyle to an urban, industrialized one—and the distance that's put between us and our food. Existential anxiety over what that change has done to our food and thus ourselves is what unites all diet literature.

"Diet books replicate the 19th century religious form of the jeremiad," Bitar said. "They say we are fat, we are ugly, we are sinners—but together we can lose the weight and regain our understanding of what nature and God can bring." In an essay for the food studies journal *Gastronomica*, historian Michael Kideckel noted that this understanding of food invariably launders a reactionary view of history.

"In this philosophy of the past, Americans must rediscover a 'primitive' instinct from a time when women did more work within the home, immigrants and indigenous people were even more marginalized, and fewer people saw culture and tradition as the product of specific



**"Think about how mad people were when they couldn't get paper products."**

—Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts





human decisions,” Kideckel wrote. For Durant, our collective health went to shit when women left the kitchen, outsourcing the cooking to corporations. “Their traditional role was always an important one and shouldn’t be trivialized,” he said in a 2017 interview.

Dieting has been considered a feminine pursuit for so long that when Weight Watchers first marketed to men in 2007, said Tulsa University professor Emily Contois, the tagline was “Real men don’t diet.” But the first diet plans emerged during the mid- to late 19th century, when the ideal man came to be “embodied in muscular selves, nations, empires and races,” wrote the essayist Pankaj Mishra, who drew parallels between the 19th century’s ideas of manliness and those that “contaminate politics and culture across the world in the 21st century.”

The earliest diet to go by that name was a meat-heavy, proto-low-carb plan credited to a wealthy Londoner named William Banting, who in 1863 published the pamphlet *Letter on Corpulence*. It was such a best seller that “Bant” became a synonym for “diet.” Dr. James Salisbury, the inventor of the steaks, was another diet pioneer. He experimented with periods of eating only a single food like bread, oatmeal, baked beans, or asparagus before landing on—what else?—beef. It was the food that is “most easily digested” and “that we can subsist on exclusively the longest,” wrote Elma Stuart, a follower of Salisbury’s, in her book *What Must I Do to Get Well?*

Salisbury saw his book *The Relation of Alimentation and Disease* as a way to address the character and capabilities of Western men. Civilization, he wrote, was damaging their physical and moral health, making them more likely to “sin” and “shirk responsibility.” He may have been influenced by Mose Velsor, a columnist for the *New York Atlas*, who in the 1850s worried that city life was producing a generation of soy boys. When Velsor’s columns were rediscovered and republished in 2016 as *Guide to Manly Health and Training*, they bore the author’s real name: Walt Whitman. “Healthy manly virility,” he wrote, was being depleted. To foster a more “pure-blooded race,” Whitman recommended an end to “confections, sweets, salads, things fried in grease.” Instead he advocated eating fresh meat “with as few outside condiments as possible.”

The connection between eating meat and the superiority of Western men was drawn out further in an 1869 essay “The Diet of Brain Workers” by the neurologist George Miller Beard. “What have the natives of South America, the savages of Africa, the stupid Greenlander, the peasantry of Europe, all combined, done for civilization, in comparison with any single beef-eating class of Europe?” he wondered. Beard is better known for his theory that the Euro-American brain was so powerful that it could overwork itself into a condition called neurasthenia—stress or exhaustion. In his 1881 book

*American Nervousness*, he wrote that the affliction that came to be known as Americanitis was caused by the technological advancements of modern civilization. One such advancement was the “mental activity of women.”

To cure Americanitis, Beard prescribed that men harden themselves by working on cattle ranches, of course. Theodore Roosevelt would epitomize this transformation in American masculinity. He gained a reputation in the New York Assembly as an effeminate jane-dandy but returned from his time on the frontier with the stoic, aggressive cowboy bravado that would define and plague American masculinity for at least 100 more years.

As president, Roosevelt popularized the term “race suicide” to describe the fear that excessively fertile immigrants would outbreed their racial betters. Calling it “an unpardonable crime,” in a 1914 article, “Twisted Eugenics,” he castigated women who chose to attend college or use contraception instead of focusing on repopulating the white race. It’s not unlike the present-day fears of white genocide or the great replacement that you’ll find in the tweets of Iowa Representative Steve King or in the white nationalist literature uncovered on Trump senior policy adviser Stephen Miller’s e-mail server.

Toughening up on the frontier also meant interaction with Indigenous tribes. Even Salisbury’s beef remedy was inspired by his observations of Native Americans. “There is no reason why we of civilized communities should not live to an even greater age than man does in the wild state,” he wrote. But it’s unlikely that Salisbury ever witnessed the healthy wild state of beef eaters, because cattle are not indigenous to North America.

Beef’s journey to the top of the American diet began with the near extinction of bison and the genocide and forced removal of Indigenous tribes who subsisted on hunting that animal. “Cattle ranching becomes central to the dispossession of Native lands and the takeover of western ecosystems,” Notre Dame’s Specht pointed out. “Cattle are a tool of, and a justification for, taking that land.”

At the same time that American manhood was redefined as the strong, silent type roaming the western frontier, beef became hypercommodified, readily available and relatively inexpensive for the first time in history. “The idea that beef is something you eat all the time is the product of industrial agriculture, it’s a product of cities, and it’s a product of the expansion of commodity markets,” Specht continued.

To have a seemingly limitless supply of beef was such a global novelty that it became a badge of Americanness. “Immigrants would write home and say, ‘Life in America is hard, but at least I get red meat all the time,’” Specht said. We can but wonder how the largely immigrant workforce at the JBS plant in Grand Island felt about receiving 10 pounds of free ground beef as a coronavirus bonus.

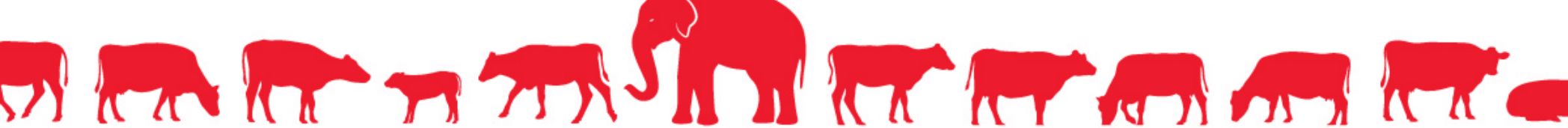


**Adrienne Rose Bitar:** “Diet books replicate the 19th century religious form of the jeremiad.”



**Dr. James Salisbury:** The creator of the namesake steak maintained that civilization is harmful to your health.



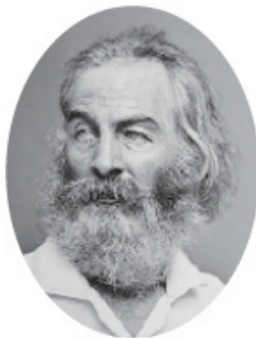


**W**HERE DO YOU GO THESE DAYS TO MINGLE with some of the thought leaders advocating for beef to remain a central part of the American diet? Out west. Last August, over 150 people came together for three days at the University of San Diego student center for the eighth annual Ancestral Health Symposium, a big-tent conference that encompasses paleo, keto, and carnivore people along with anyone else who wants to examine “current health challenges through the context of our ancestral heritage,” according to the Ancestral Health Society’s website. It’s a heterogeneous community with plenty of internal debate, but its members share an intense skepticism of the medical, nutritional, and scientific establishment and a celebration of real, natural, traditional food.

“This is the Wild West, man. This is the fringe that the mainstream poaches from,” a sturdily built, sandy-haired chiropractor from Los Angeles told me as we looked out at a room of lean, mostly white attendees outfitted for functionality—wicking athletic shirts, yoga pants, five-toed shoes, Xero sandals, blue-light-blocking shades, and slick metal water bottles. He wasn’t wrong. The ancestral health community has been on the front lines of reclaiming healthy fat from unfair criticism; despite critiques of the community as overly patriarchal, some feminists have praised ancestral diets as a respite from a culture that equates “beauty with thinness,” to quote Bitar. If you know about collagen peptides, circadian rhythms, gut microbes, or the dangers of inflammation, these people may have had something to do with it.

Yet there remains the fact that humans must change our relationship to meat, especially beef, if we are to avoid ecological catastrophe, let alone improve the lives of meatpacking workers or help the animals themselves. But if meat is of essential value to human health, we seem to be in an existential bind, trapped between our perceived nutritional needs and the capacity of our ecosystem and labor force to meet them. In “Can Seven Billion Humans Go Paleo?” the writer Erica Etelson wondered, “If there’s not enough animal protein to go around without cooking the planet, who should be first in line?” That’s the mostly unasked question at the heart of the meat debate: one of power and ethics, not fat and protein. That’s also the dilemma that many people grapple with (this soycialist writer included) as they eat the occasional burger, steak, or oxtail.

“I’ve been called right wing for saying meat is healthy,” said Diana Rodgers, a farmer and dietitian. “It’s very political, but it shouldn’t be. You’re either a less-meat environmentalist or you eat a lot of meat and don’t care about the environment.” Rodgers was in the midst of debunking the EAT-Lancet Commission’s “planetary health diet,” which aims to accommodate the growing global population and planetary limits. The guidelines allow for only one serving of red meat per week—a death sentence to the people in this small auditorium. Rodgers disclosed that the General Mills meat snack company Epic Provisions had paid her way to the conference to help promote her upcoming book and documentary *Sacred Cow* (“the nutritional, environmental and ethical case for better beat,” according to her website),



**Diet theorist Mose Velsor:** Better known as Walt Whitman, he inveighed against “confections, sweets, salads, things fried in grease.”



**Allan Savory:** Former soldier, ecologist, rancher, and originator of the controversial holistic management approach to soil conservation.

**“If there’s not enough animal protein to go around, who should be the first in line?”**

—Erica Etelson

which was cowritten by Robb Wolf, the author of the best-selling *The Paleo Solution*.

Rodgers argues that beef is the ideal food for the health of the planet because of the potential for holistic range management—an approach to cattle rearing popularized by Zimbabwean rancher Allan Savory and his namesake institute. To oversimplify, cattle are strategically moved around a plot of land in a way that mimics the millions of bison that grazed for thousands of years in North America. This grazing technique restores grasslands and revitalizes soil in a way that allows for substantial—maybe even earth-saving—levels of carbon sequestration. While holistic range management (and the prospect of carbon-neutral burgers) makes intuitive sense and has serious momentum, it’s also highly polarizing.

There are credible scientists on either side of the Savory debate, including David Briske and Richard Teague, two professors in the same department at Texas A&M University. Savory’s past as an officer in the Rhodesian Army hasn’t done him any favors among his critics, who portray him as a delusional iconoclast with no respect for scientific rigor. But to his proponents, which include a growing list of farmers around the world, Savory is a misunderstood sage. The complexity and dynamism of his methods cannot be fully appreciated in summary form.

If there is a middle ground between the dystopian reality of the beef industry and the unsettling vision of a world without animal agriculture posited by Impossible Foods CEO Pat Brown, holistic range management could be just that. It doesn’t seem right that the Norwegian billionaire couple behind EAT-Lancet, Gunhild and Petter Stordalen, are allowed to prescribe diets for the rest of the world while they fly around in a private jet with their own carbon footprint unregulated. I was open to the possibility that the Shake Shack burger I ate the night before was not a personal moral failing but actually a righteous rebellion against the 1 percent. That would make life easier. Then an audience member asked Rodgers if there would be enough land to support a large population on the beef-heavy diet she recommends. She assured him there would be.

“And it could sustain the same population or more as an agrarian-based economy?”

Rodgers was visibly flustered. “What I can tell you is that there’s too many of us,” she replied. “Do we want lots of people fed like crap, or do we want healthy people? Our current system is completely failing and producing sick people and killing our environment. So regenerative agriculture is actually the only solution we have moving forward. And, you know, there’s too many people.”

Perhaps Rodgers should have chosen an other title for her lecture than “Feeding the World a Healthy and Sustainable Diet”—and other opponents than EAT-Lancet and Impossible Foods. At least their visions attempt to account for the world’s population as it exists. Only 3 percent of the beef produced in the United States is designated as grass-fed; even less is raised by Savory’s method. Any hypothetical solution in which factory farms transform into holistically managed ranges will ultimately have to confront the multinational agribusiness industry that has been consolidating power for decades. Eating



beef is political, whether we want it to be or not. But what was most troubling about Rodgers's answer was her "too many people" declaration: In those thought experiments, it's always the less powerful who count as extra. It's not necessarily right wing to say that meat is healthy, but to quickly revert to claims of overpopulation calls up the darkest strains of both the conservation movement and ancestral health diet literature.

In 1975 a doctor named Walter Voegtlin self-published his foundational text, *The Stone Age Diet*, which told a story similar to Rodgers's about the lack of sufficient animal protein to feed a surplus population. Voegtlin's solution included "limit[ing] reproduction to superior types of individuals" and "practicing euthanasia of imperfect newborns." Rodgers and others who advise people to eat more meat surely don't endorse that approach, but it's worth highlighting how similar their framing is: For some to thrive, others must disappear.

**I** KEPT RODGERS AND VOEGTLIN IN MIND TOWARD THE end of an interview with Tristan Haggard, the proprietor of the popular keto-carnivore YouTube channel Primal Edge Health, which is also the name of his diet brand. A gregarious former vegan, he had spent much of our two-hour Skype call building his case that the plant-based-food movement evolved out of the eugenics movement and is behind a conspiracy to depopulate the world by feminizing men through "industrialized vegan kibble." His mantra, "Eat meat, make families," is a response to what he sees as the growing "cultural degeneracy" of modern city life. "Instead of being concerned with how you can feed your family or protect your community, men are taught about how cool they might look in a dress," Haggard said. That's why he fled California to raise his family on a farm in the Andes Mountains in Ecuador. Now he lives like a 21st century primal man—eating grass-fed steak, drinking raw milk, and creating content for his subscribers and clients about the dangers of modern "soycial engineering."

I told Haggard I had just heard Rodgers recite the same Malthusian talking points he attributes to vegans. "I'm glad you brought that up. It's important to read with nuance," he said. While he recognized that overpopulation arguments are usually directed at his neighbors in the Global South, he's appeared on the white nationalist publishing company Arktos's channel to talk up the carnivore diet as part of the fight against "globalist hegemony," and he's also rushed to the defense of the Nazis kicked out of the farmers' market in Bloomington, Ind. It seems that for Haggard, regardless of your political leanings, if you're on the side of more meat, you're part of the resistance.



**The Blonde Buttermaker:** This former vegetarian liberal has become an animal-fat-obsessed white nationalist.

**"Instead of being concerned with how you can feed your family or protect your community, men are taught about how cool they might look in a dress."**

—Tristan Haggard

Haggard touts small-scale, local agriculture as a weapon against the globalists, yet he calls climate change a "word game" and factory farming a "straw man" argument. His fun-house mirror of inconsistent, repellent, and altogether weird beliefs is not uncommon among prominent followers of Weston Price, the godfather of the ancestral health movement. In 1939, Price published a flawed but compelling eth-

nography, *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, describing traditional preindustrial diets from the Alps to the Andes. He found several constants, the most important of which are the vitality of animal fat and the degeneration of people's health after exposure to the Western industrial diet. Today his followers have translated his work into contemporary diet guidelines. Rather than eschew any specific food group, they focus on minimally processed food and old-world farming and food-preservation techniques.

In the vendor room at the Ancestral Health Symposium, I spoke with a disarmingly friendly volunteer from the Weston A. Price Foundation about the pleasures of bone marrow and roasting vegetables in duck fat and another who was in the midst of shooting a documentary about grass-fed beef. The foundation is best known for *Nourishing Traditions*, the best-selling cookbook by its founder, Sally Fallon Morell, which popularized Price's work. While the pandemic has shown the importance of local, organic farms, which Price's followers have supported for years, they're still easily dismissed as cranks because of their opposition to the scientific and medical establishment, as demonstrated by their commitment to unpasteurized dairy.

Unfortunately, that's not the most controversial claim the foundation's leaders have made. In 2018, Morrell wrote on her blog that "the Earth stopped warming in the late 1990s and now is in a cooling trend," so "we don't have to feel guilty for driving an SUV or eating bacon." The foundation doesn't have an official position on climate change, and when some of her followers protested in the comment section, she replied that the discourse around global warming reminded her of the "relentless propaganda against animal fats." Like Haggard, she seems willing to embrace anyone sympathetic to her cause.

In 2015, Morrell appeared on Red Ice Radio, a Swedish media platform that the Southern Poverty Law Center called one of the most effective white nationalist outlets on the Internet. Before it was banned from YouTube, Red Ice unveiled a cooking and lifestyle show hosted by a neo-Nazi domestic goddess named the Blonde Buttermaker. In an interview on the white nationalist channel NoWhiteGuilt, she spoke of how influential Price's work had been on her journey from former liberal vegetarian to animal-fat-obsessed white nationalist. In the wrong





hands, emphasizing ancestral wisdom can be reinterpreted as a permission to embrace ethnonationalism.

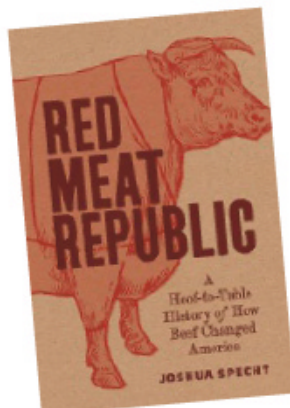
But Price's research does have value if read critically. In *Diet and the Disease of Civilization*, Bitar analyzes his work using the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's concept of imperialist nostalgia, in which "agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed."

Nowhere was such nostalgia more evident than during the symposium presentation by Paul Saladino, a young, charismatic, and totally shredded "carnivore MD." Saladino described the "uphill battle in consciousness" to convince the world that plant fiber is unnecessary for human consumption. Repeating the ancestral health movement's dictum that Indigenous cultures prized fat as a symbol of health and fertility, Saladino encouraged the audience members to swap their kale salads for rib eye and organ meats. He closed by invoking an Andean tribal saying, "*Wiracocha*," which he translated as "I wish you a sea of fat."

*Wiracocha* was also used to describe Spanish conquistadors, whose white skin was foamy like fat. It's a coincidence that reveals the historical revisionism pervasive in this community. Throughout the weekend there were photographs of healthy, happy, well-fed preindustrial Indigenous groups. But there was no acknowledgment that the rise of cattle ranching depended on eliminating the means of subsistence for Indigenous tribes—or that the destruction of foodways has been a deliberate strategy of colonial powers. The slideshows simply showed beautiful people victimized by the forces of nature, whose wisdom was now bestowed on us. A young woman asked Saladino what he would say to someone curious about the carnivore diet. "Welcome to the tribe," he replied.

**A** SYMPATHETIC LOOK AT THIS CONFUSED YEARNING for tribal belonging would take into account what Bitar discovered as the main recurring theme in paleo diet books. Surprisingly, it has little to do with food or nutrition. Our ancestors "enjoyed a balanced life of working, playing, relaxing, and worshipping.... They felt closeness to one another and everyone had purpose," Bitar said, quoting from *Living Paleo for Dummies*. It's a human need as basic as food: meaning and connection, especially in a country defined by loneliness and living through a second gilded age of economic inequality.

This was made even clearer during the last presentation I attended, by a naturopath named Nasha Winters. She informed us that in the past three years, American life expectancy rates declined. The diseases of civilization now have company—opiate addiction, alcoholism, and suicide, the diseases of despair.



**Weston Price:** Intellectual godfather of the ancestral health movement.

Nowhere is the degeneration of the quality of life in the United States more acute than in the communities surrounding the meatpacking plants that dot rural areas. Americans do need better diets, but we also need to realize that while consumer politics might be transformative for individuals, as public policy, it amounts to window dressing. As University of California–Santa Cruz professor Julie Guthman noted in her book *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, the artificially low price of food has long functioned as a replacement for a living wage and a social safety net, and it comes with serious environmental and public health consequences.

Over the past 100 years, from Upton Sinclair to Michael Pollan, many Americans have been curious about how the sausage is made. But what most of them really want to know is whether they can keep eating it. The public became concerned with the conditions inside meatpacking plants not out of a concern for workers' health but out of worry for what meat shortages might do to their own. Sinclair's famous regret was that he aimed for the public's heart with *The Jungle* but hit them in the stomach instead. He hoped that exposing the horrifying conditions in meatpacking plants could spark a socialist uprising, but all he got was the Meat Safety Act of 1906.

"The logic that consumer prices are the highest good in terms of social policy, that...comes from beef," said Joshua Specht. Any movement to reduce meat consumption must address the role that cheap beef has played in providing meaning and nourishment to the masses, or else that ground will be ceded to the Sebastian Gorkas and Donald Trumps of the world.

The coronavirus pandemic and the looming global ecological crisis are collective problems that individual solutions won't be able to solve. But as Bitar writes, the best way to approach the question of diet is "not to call out ignorance" but rather "to understand myths." When we examine these myths, we "can see them truly as the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and, perhaps, a story for which we can write a better plot." As difficult as it is to forecast what America will look like after the pandemic, it could be enough of a ground-shifting historical event to spawn new stories—about why we eat, what we eat, and what we must change to survive.

"Food is so much about who we are and who we've been. To just change that overnight is not really that easy, actually," said Specht. "But food isn't just a building block for who we are, it's a building block for the kind of society we want to live in." If we can ground our food system in a more rigorous understanding of history, perhaps then we can remake it as a reflection of the society we want to live in. That would be the real red pill, waking us to a new reality. ■





# Failing the Test of Covid-19

New York City's public schools **were slow  
to close when the coronavirus struck.**

The consequences were fatal.

SARAH JAFFE





**W**

HEN MR. SMITH, A TEACHER AT CROTONA INTERNATIONAL High School on the Grace Dodge Campus in the Bronx in New York City, started to feel sick, he thought it might be because he'd been training hard. (Smith is a pseudonym, to protect the teacher from reprisals.) An avid runner, he didn't at first think that his achiness might be the novel coronavirus he'd been hearing about. That was Monday, March 9.

When he got to school, Smith said, a teacher who "is never absent" was out sick with flu-like symptoms. The next day, Tuesday, that teacher was out sick again, and another teacher wasn't feeling well and went home early because her daughter was ill, too. On Wednesday that teacher texted her colleagues, "My daughter tested positive."

"That is when I kind of freaked out," Smith said. He went to an urgent care center near his house and told the doctors there that a colleague had a child who had tested positive for Covid-19. "Immediately, they put me in an isolation room," he said. The next day, he got his test result: positive. Yet when he informed school administrators of the news, the school was not closed, he said; rather, the next morning, after school had begun, the administration told the staff that the school would remain open because the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) did not have the case on record; it was self-reported.

"I'm like, 'Self-reporting? You've got to be kidding me,'" Smith said. "I sent you a fax that was sent to me with the results directly from the hospital. How are you going to say that this is self-reporting?" Somebody dropped the ball, and somebody dropped the ball big."

Nearly three months since Smith took sick, countless other Department of Education employees have fallen ill with Covid-19, and at least 74 have died. They were as young as 29 and came from all five of the city's boroughs. They include teachers (30), paraprofessionals (28), guidance counselors (2), facilities employees (2), and administrators (2). The disproportionately high number of paraprofessionals killed has raised serious questions about inequalities in the system. Teachers' aides, said Ms. Jones (also a pseudonym), another teacher at Grace Dodge, "have fewer protections within the school system."

The DOE began releasing these numbers on April 13, amid mounting pressure from educators and elected officials to share information about the toll of Covid-19 on the school community. The department collected the numbers from reports by educators' family members, but many teachers said the real number could be larger. As it is, the death toll for education workers has been notably high—though in an early April statement, the DOE, in conjunction with the DOHMH, cautioned against linking coronavirus infections to the school system, saying, "School buildings are not a place of greater

**The question of how many school workers could have been saved has haunted New York City educators.**

**All's fine!** Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio reassure the public as they confirm the first case of Covid-19 in New York.

exposure than any other part of our city."

The teachers who spoke with *The Nation* aren't so sure. As public health experts have begun publishing analyses of the early days of the US outbreak, raising the possibility that the number of deaths could have been reduced by as much as 50 to 80 percent had governments instituted social distancing a week or two earlier, the question of how many school workers could have been saved has haunted New York City educators. For many, the high number of deaths has served as yet more evidence of the great cost educators have paid for what they consider the city's drawn-out decision to close the public schools. The deaths, wrote Manhattan teacher Ellen Schweitzer in an e-mail, were "horribly tragic and not surprising. It's what we knew would happen. It's what drove us to take the actions necessary to close the schools."

Now, as the conversation turns to reopening, they worry that the same lack of care will characterize any return to the classroom. Their experience thus far leads them to fear that budget cuts from the coronavirus-related economic crisis will take a bite out of the public schools and leave them overstretched and underprotected.

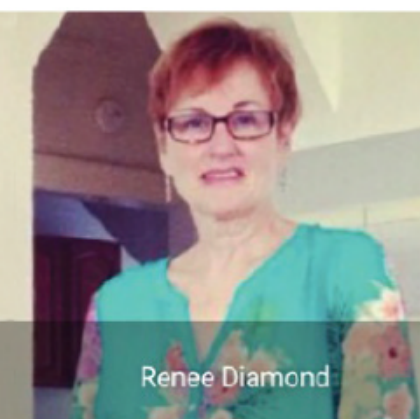
**F**OR TEACHERS LIKE SCHWEITZER, THE FIRST TWO weeks in March remain fateful, a moment when the DOE could have acted boldly but didn't. On March 1, the first case was confirmed in New York City; by March 12, the number of confirmed cases in the city had ballooned to 95. During this period, school systems in cities and states that were far less affected—from San Francisco to Philadelphia, from Ohio to Florida—had announced that they would be closing. Nonetheless, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio insisted that New York City schools would remain open. "We are going to do our damndest to keep the schools open," he said as late as March 13.

For its part, the DOE continued to broadcast calm,

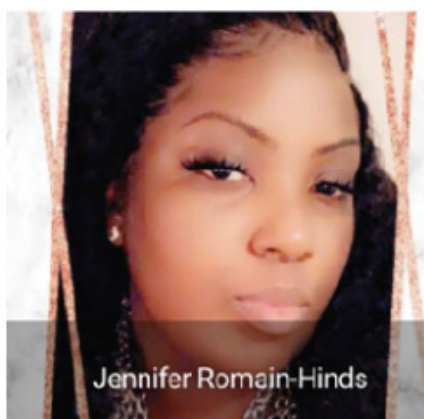


*Sarah Jaffe is a reporting fellow at Type Media Center and the author of the forthcoming Work Won't Love You Back.*





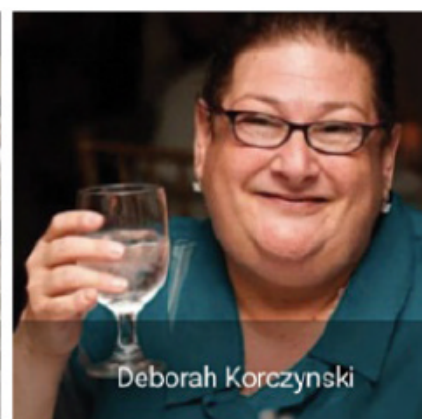
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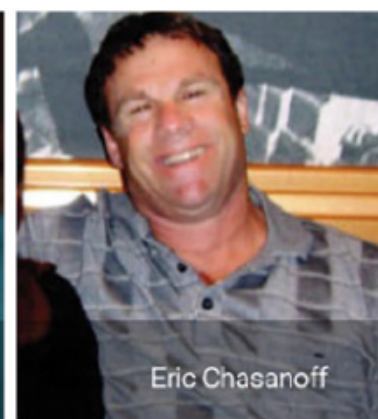
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Deborah Korczynski



Eric Chasanoff

reiterating its protocols for schools in e-mails to teachers and parents. As late as March 10, those protocols, outlined in a letter to families, consisted primarily of “strongly encouraging” handwashing throughout the day and promising to ensure every school building had a nurse, which was not the case before the coronavirus outbreak. The guidelines further stated that each school would be supplied with face masks to give to students and staffers who displayed Covid-19 symptoms. But those masks never materialized, according to Ms. Johnson (also not her real name), another teacher on the Grace Dodge campus.

In a statement to *The Nation*, the DOE also said it had directed custodians to perform “deep cleaning” of the schools “twice a week.” And it said it had “surveyed both public and non-public schools buildings to ensure they had a sufficient supply of hand soap, paper towels, and anti-viral disinfectant inventory.”

But Johnson said her school didn’t have sufficient supplies. “Finally, when a group of teachers came together to start sanitizing our laptops regularly and our desks regularly, we quickly ran out of Clorox wipes and any materials to do that with,” she said. “There was just such neglect.”

Perhaps most alarming of all to school staffers was the plan for what would happen if a member of a school community got sick with Covid-19. Under New York state guidelines, schools would be closed for 24 hours *only* after a case had been confirmed by the health department; the problem was, it was almost impossible for anyone to get tested at that point. Even more confounding, as cases clearly mounted in the city, DOE officials sent an internal memo to staffers telling them not to call the DOHMH to report cases of Covid-19 among teachers and staff.

In a response to questions about the memo, the DOE said, “DOHMH and DOE had two-way communication on these issues at all times” and that the department had “escalated” reports of potential cases to “both City and State.” As a result, “there was no need for individuals to call the DOHMH hotline which was set up to handle information from testing labs—we were directly checking.”

Yet as Smith’s case suggests, this process was, if nothing else, slow and cumbersome at a time when every moment counted. While the DOE told *The Nation* that it “immediately looked into this [case] when it was brought to our attention” and “took steps in accordance with applicable State guidance...and notified the school community” when the positive result was confirmed, that notification did not arrive until Monday evening, March 16; that was four days after Smith got his positive test result. Moreover, the notice went only to staff, teachers said, not the whole school community, which remained in the dark about the test result.

The guidance given to teachers and schools was “nonsensical,” City Councilmember Brad Lander said. One school, which his children had at-

**In memoriam:** They were teachers, para-professionals, and dedicated educators who taught the children of New York City—and lost their lives to Covid-19.

**Rank-and-file teachers began to talk to one another and came to the same conclusion: They had to do something to pressure elected officials to close the schools.**

tended, had identified a parent as positive for the virus. “They had a policy that if a student or a teacher was a positive ID’d case, they would close the school for 24 hours and clean it, but if a parent had been positively ID’d—even if the whole family was housed together—then nothing happens. The school is just open. It was totally an incoherent policy. It bore no relationship to the science.”

In a statement to *The Nation*, DOE spokesperson Miranda Barbot defended the department’s handling of the crisis. “Since the beginning, the Department of Education issued near-daily updates aligned to federal, state, and local guidance that adjusted to the rapidly changing public health landscape,” she wrote. “All of our decisions are informed by public health experts in order to protect the health and safety of our students and staff.”

**B**Y THE TIME DE BLASIO AND SCHOOLS CHANCELLOR Richard Carranza decided to close the schools on March 15, there was a sense that the city had already fallen behind the curve. But by many accounts, the decision might have been even more delayed, the deaths more numerous, if not for a robust pressure campaign waged both inside and outside the government. On the inside were staffers at the DOHMH, who reportedly threatened to resign, as well as de Blasio’s own advisers, who fought bitterly with him. On the outside were the teachers, whose concern about the city’s failure to act more aggressively to keep educators, students, and their families safe reached a boiling point in the days before the shutdown announcement.

For Smith, that point came shortly after he told the school of his Covid-19 diagnosis and his school’s administration opted to keep the school open. “It wasn’t about me anymore,” he said. “I am 50 years old, but I am pretty healthy. I am a lifelong athlete. Forget about me. I teach 90 kids a week, and those kids are with other teachers. It is my duty to make sure that this does not become worse.”

Smith wasn’t alone. Frustrated with the slow response, rank-and-file teachers began to talk to one another about what they were experiencing, and they came to the same conclusion: They had to do something to pressure elected officials to close the schools.

Schweitzer, who teaches at Stuyvesant High School and came down with symptoms similar to Covid-19’s after the schools closed, recalled that early on there was a sense that even if the virus wasn’t a problem for young people, they could nonetheless be carriers, tracking it from school to home and home to school. “We were very concerned about the health of our more vulnerable colleagues,” she said. “We could all name particular people who work in



the school buildings we know have vulnerable health conditions or are older. When you can put a specific name and a face to somebody who is high risk, how do you not do everything you can to try to protect that person?”

From there, the discussion about taking action came together very quickly, Schweitzer said. “There were people, certainly by [March] 10 and 11, who were walking around saying, ‘This is crazy. The schools should be closed.’ As soon as people started talking about it out loud, it was kind of like an emperor’s new clothes thing, like, ‘Yes, why aren’t we? This is ridiculous. Why are we reporting to school in the high-risk environment that we’re in?’”

With little sign of movement from the de Blasio administration, teachers began trying to take their concerns public. One teacher, whose wife is an emergency physician, wrote a piece published in the *New York Daily News* on March 13; three others cowrote an op-ed published by *The New York Times* on March 14, all calling for schools to be closed.

The teachers began to use an existing e-mail list for union members to talk to one another; in those conversations, the idea of a sick-out—an unofficial work stoppage in which workers call in sick in an organized fashion—became popular. “You start looking at those exponential graphs, and it becomes really clear that every day is crucial,” Schweitzer said.

Strikes by public employees are banned under New York’s Taylor Law, and although the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—which represents New York’s 75,000 teachers, 19,000 classroom paraprofessionals, and other education and care workers—called for schools to be closed, the union did not officially endorse plans for a job action. But regardless of that,

**“We had to advocate to get soap in the bathrooms.... The school nurse was only there a couple of days a week.”**

—a New York City teacher

#### School’s out:

Students depart Stuyvesant High School on March 13, the last day New York City schools were in session.

the teachers were becoming active.

“We were pretty aware that we were going to be in classrooms as long as possible,” said Jones. Despite the promises in the letters to parents that there would be frequent handwashing and a nurse present, she said, “we had to advocate to get soap in the bathrooms because there wasn’t soap in the bathrooms. The school nurse was only there a couple of days a week, even though there is a clinic downstairs.”

By March 13, rumors had begun circulating on the Grace Dodge Campus, where Jones works, that someone had fallen sick. The same was true at schools across the city; according to the mayor, only 68 percent of students showed up that day. “They are really active on social media, and they are highly connected,” Jones said of her students. Parents, too, had begun expressing their anger on social media, using the hashtag #CloseNYCSchools.

Over the weekend, Jones was involved in phone conversations with other teachers, including a call with over 400 educators organized by the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE), a reform caucus in the union that was formed in the wake of the successful 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike. While many MORE members are longtime activists, Schweitzer noted that people “came out of the woodwork” to get involved in pushing for school closure.

“The people who are the regular organizers, obviously, they made it happen,” she said. “But it was also so many rank-and-filers, who hadn’t necessarily been that involved before, just sprang into action seeing that this was urgent, that others needed to step in and take charge and that a sick-out would work.”

Over the weekend, Schweitzer said, teachers started







reporting to the city's automated system for requesting a substitute that they would be absent on Monday; they did so early on so the numbers would be available for officials to see. Even before the planned sick-out, there was an increase in absences that Friday across the system. Finally on Sunday, de Blasio and Carranza announced that the schools would close. The announcement arrived in the late afternoon, leaving parents scrambling to figure out how to navigate the coming week.

**Suspended:** Richard Carranza, right, New York City's Department of Education chancellor, announces the closure of the nation's largest school system, March 15.

**I**N RESISTING SHUTTING DOWN THE SCHOOLS FOR AS long as he did, de Blasio returned again and again to the idea of equity and his concern that closing them would inflict enormous harm on the city's millions of vulnerable families. The schools should remain open, he insisted, so that low-income residents and the children of health care providers had somewhere to go during the day—not only a place to learn and be safe but also to receive free meals.

To many teachers, like Jones, this idea made a certain sense. “I know that a lot of people are concerned about getting access to essential services for the most-needy students, and that is a real issue,” she said.

Yet then as now, they wondered what might have happened had the mayor channeled his rightful concern for equity into preparing the system to help the most vulnerable families weather a likely shutdown rather than stubbornly fighting it and, in the process, putting those same students and their families at risk. There was no way, Jones said, that keeping a million students in packed buildings for hours at a time would have been safe, but the buildings could have been used to distribute food and even provide health care. Johnson agreed, saying, “I am not a nurse, but I am happy to hand out food, lunches. Or teach me how to give the swab [for coronavirus testing]. There is a role for us to play rather than acting like we are part of the problem.”

As it was, the transition to the country's largest experiment in remote learning was bumpy. For Smith, who is

**What if the mayor had channeled his rightful concern for equity into preparing the system to help the most vulnerable families weather the shutdown?**

healthy once again, remote teaching has been a source of both gratification and frustration. “It is very rewarding,” he said, when students ask how he is doing, and he wants to make sure the students are still learning so it doesn't worsen what teachers call the summer lag, the loss of learning during summer break.

But of course, online classes in these circumstances are far from normal. “For a lot of us, we are finding it more difficult than going in and just doing our regular job,” said Schweitzer, who when we spoke June 1 was suffering a relapse of what still had not been confirmed as Covid-19. “It seems to be very uneven, by school and by district, exactly what and how much teachers are expected to do and how much they are expected to make the students do. I have some fear about how this is going to be used long term.”

According to the DOE, it has given out 255,000 Internet-enabled iPads in addition to 175,000 school laptops, tablets, and Chromebooks to make sure all students can access remote learning. Yet that process has been incomplete. Only about two-thirds of Jones's students are able to connect to online classrooms, she said. And even with all the equipment in place, translating real-world education into its remote counterpart has been challenging.

“Online learning is no substitute for classroom learning,” City Councilmember Lander said. Despite the DOE's impressive if troubled attempt to distribute the necessary technology to students, he said, online learning has exacerbated the existing disparities within the school system. “It is no good for middle-class white students, either, but it also amplifies inequality.”

Teachers didn't expect the district to be fully prepared to go all online, yet they were still frustrated about how the rollout of online learning went. “We should be able to expect the administration of the DOE to provide helpful guidance and support as we do our jobs,” Schweitzer said. “But sadly, many teachers don't have much evidence that the DOE does this even under normal circumstances, so while we are angry that leadership has done so little, it's also not the case that we are really so surprised.”

Now, as the school year comes to a stuttering end, educators face a new set of challenges. There is the looming question of when and how the schools will reopen, and there is the threat of dramatic changes to the education system: In April, Governor Andrew Cuomo promised more education cuts—as much as a 20 percent reduction—and on May 5, he announced that he plans to partner with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create a new normal for the schools. “The old model of everybody goes and sits in a classroom and the teacher is in front of that classroom and teaches that class and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms,” Cuomo told reporters. “Why? With all the technology you have?”

New York State United Teachers, the statewide teachers' union federation, reacted immediately, condemning Cuomo's plan. “If we want to reimagine education, let's start with addressing the need for social



workers, mental health counselors, school nurses, enriching arts courses, advanced courses and smaller class sizes in school districts across the state,” read a statement from NYSUT president Andy Pallotta.

Yet even as they scramble to respond to this latest attempt at top-down reform, the teachers are in the difficult position of trying to prevent a premature reopening and fighting the imposition of long-term remote learning—which the teachers who spoke with *The Nation* stressed would be bad for teachers, students, and overstretched parents. Right now, the question of when the city’s schools will reopen remains unanswered.

Will students and teachers return to their schools in September and resume traditional classes? Or will they open under some modified program that involves staggered attendance—with students alternating which days of the week they attend—along with temperature checks and other public health protocols? Or will they hold off until the arrival of a vaccine? The DOE told *The Nation* that it is “considering many options for a successful and safe reopening in the fall and will always follow the guidance of our public health experts.”

**“Once the dust settles from this... predictable trauma, we want more from schools. We want every school to be a place where students truly thrive.”**

—Marilena Marchetti

The UFT has not endorsed a specific proposal, but it has released a public petition with demands for what reopening schools must include: widespread access to regular testing, temperature checks, rigorous cleaning protocols, protective equipment, and “an exhaustive tracing procedure.” For its part, MORE is calling for a memorandum of agreement around the crisis, laying out clearly what teachers’ responsibilities and rights are in these extraordinary circumstances. “This MOA,” the caucus said in a statement, “could also serve as the basis for future crises, which are only going to become more common as the effects of climate change continue to be unaddressed.” Because teachers’ conditions vary widely from school to school, MORE wants teachers to have discretion over the form their instruction takes, control over their working hours, and relief from the evaluations that make their jobs more difficult.

“I think these kinds of things are more important to attend to than unrealistic fantasies about reopening school buildings,” Schweitzer said. “But of course, everyone is loath to point out the reality that schools can’t be safely reopened for such an indeterminate amount of time.”

The reality of reopening in New York City is a logistical nightmare, Schweitzer noted in an e-mail. “Every time I hear someone talk about spacing students out in the classroom, I roll my eyes for several reasons, but mainly I just think it’s an irrelevant conversation for New York City due to the transit situation.... [I]t is largely a waste of time to imagine ways of keeping us ‘safe and healthy’ in the school building when we have no safe and healthy way of getting to school in the first place,” she said.

But teachers are beginning to have those discussions, she added, to prepare for the battles ahead. Schweitzer wrote, “The question is, what do UFT members overall think—what are they willing to fight for, what are they willing to refuse to do.”



Those questions have taken on even more urgency as protests against police violence and white supremacy have rocked New York. “The collapse of the NYC school system in the face of coronavirus exposes the tremendous pressure our schools were under to pick up the slack of a destroyed social safety net,” said Kevin Prosen, an English teacher at IS 230 in the borough of Queens who is also a UFT delegate and a member of MORE. “Now, with the NYPD mobilizing their multibillion-dollar annual budget to counter protests against police brutality and no doubt attacking some of our students, the priorities of our liberal city and state governments are there for everyone to see. There

is no way out of this that doesn’t include redirecting major parts of the police budget to schools and other social services.”

As this article went to press, MORE was working on a health justice agenda for the schools, based on three tenets: anti-racism, public health, and full funding for education. The aim, said Marilena Marchetti, an occupational therapist at a number of Brooklyn schools and a member of the team working on the agenda, was to consolidate the values of the broad movement for education justice, involving not just UFT members but also parent, student, and community groups around the city. “We cannot go back to the way things were, with conditions that allow for the bare minimum, simply surviving. Once the dust settles from this unforeseen yet totally predictable trauma, we want more from schools. We want every school to be a place where students truly thrive,” she said. “The fact is, that will require a redistribution of wealth and taxing the rich. We’re here for that, we’re fighting for that.” ■

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(continued from page 2)

and support for extremists. Second, he infantilizes the Labour members who twice voted for Corbyn and blames him for everything. The fact is the Remain campaign was poorly run, and Labour voters backed Remain by the same margin as Scottish National Party voters. Could it be that the reason people like MacShane keep ending up on the losing side is that they believe voters are incapable of divining their own interests, both inside the Labour Party and out? "Would it not be simpler," as playwright Bertolt Brecht once wrote, "to dissolve the people and elect another?"

GARY YOUNGE  
LONDON

## No Act of Altruism

The article "Trump's Gutter Politics Just Keep Getting Nastier" by Sasha Abramsky [[TheNation.com](http://TheNation.com), May 26] wildly misrepresents the H-1B guest worker program. It has been widely abused by employers for cheaper indentured labor. It is not an act of altruism; instead, it's a way for employers to pad their profits while underpaying H-1B workers and undercutting US workers.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle have long recognized how the program is abused and have proposed the only sensible reform: higher minimum wages. Senators Bernie Sanders, Dick Durbin, and Sherrod Brown have repeatedly introduced bipartisan reform legislation that would raise wages. Representatives Bill Pascrell and Ro Khanna have introduced companion legislation in the House.

RON HIRA  
Associate Professor,  
Howard University  
WASHINGTON

## Abramsky Responds

In my article, I specifically said the visa program benefited the

country by attracting talent to US shores—and that in a global economy, it benefits the broader economy and culture to have skilled immigrants (and other immigrants) park their talents and their aspirations in the US rather than elsewhere.

The H-1B visa system is certainly ripe for reform, and Ron Hira is absolutely correct that Sanders and other progressives have proposed wage reforms around it—which I would support. But that's clearly not why Donald Trump and his senior policy adviser Stephen Miller propose hiking H-1B workers' wages; they do it as part of a broader restriction on all sorts of immigration, and that has to be seen in this xenophobic context. It's simply nonsense to give them the benefit of the doubt and say they genuinely care about prevailing wages, given all the assaults underway against US labor protections and workplace safety, their opposition to paid sick leave, their hostility to extending unemployment benefits, their forcing meatpacking employees back to work in contaminated facilities, etc.

So yes, by all means, reform the H-1B program, but do it to make immigration and wage law fairer, not to eviscerate yet another entry point into the United States for immigrants.

SASHA ABRAMSKY  
SACRAMENTO

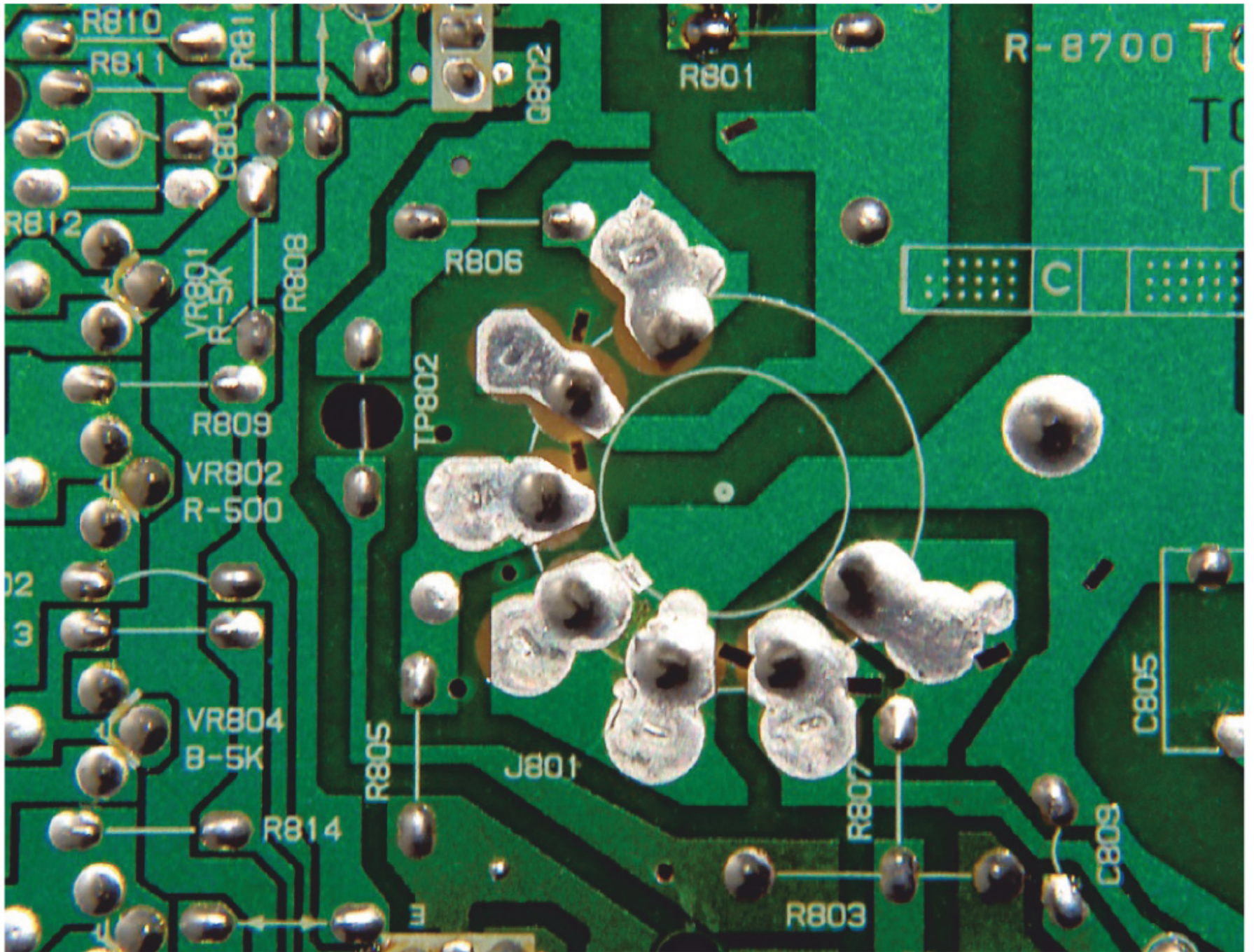
## Correction

"CARES Bears Repeating" [June 15/22] by Mike Konczal misstated the name of an organization providing analysis of unemployment insurance. It is the National Employment Law Project, not the National Employment Law Center.

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# Books & the Arts



## THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

How new technologies reproduce racial inequality

by **STEPHEN KEARSE**

**R***ace After Technology* opens with a brief personal history set in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles, where sociologist Ruha Benjamin spent a portion of her childhood. Recalling the time she set up shop on her grandmother's porch with a chalkboard and invited other kids to do math problems, she writes, "For the few who would come, I would hand out lit-

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*Stephen Kearse is a contributing writer for The Nation. He also writes for The Baffler, Pitchfork, and The New York Times Magazine.*

tle slips of paper...until someone would insist that we go play tag or hide-and-seek instead. Needless to say, I didn't have that many friends!" But beyond the porch, things weren't so cozy. As she gazed out the back window during car rides, she saw "boys lined up for police pat-downs," and inside the house she heard "the nonstop rumble of police helicopters overhead, so close that the roof would shake." The omnipresent surveillance continued when she visited her grandmother years later as a mother, her homecomings blighted by "the frustration of trying to keep the kids asleep

with the sound and light from the helicopter piercing the window's thin pane."

Benjamin's personal beginning sets the tone for her book's approach, one that focuses on how modern invasive technologies—from facial recognition software to electronic ankle monitors to the metadata of photos taken at protests—further racial inequality. Instead of confining herself to the technical reasons that infrared soap dispensers don't react to darker skin or that algorithms that use names to predict the ethnicity of job applicants exacerbate workplace discrimination,



she reconfigures technologies as vessels of history, exploring how their circumstances produce their effects. Presented as a “field guide” and subtitled “Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code,” *Race After Technology* concerns itself with introducing the many technologies that aren’t as obtrusive and menacing as armed police flying overhead but that are equally domineering. A kind of critical cipher for the age of Big Data and mass surveillance, the book illuminates how cutting-edge tech so often reproduces old inequalities. As a guide to how good intentions still fail to stem bias and prejudice (and often even amplify them), *Race After Technology* also offers us an account of how machines and algorithms can be racist. Discriminatory technology always has a human source, she reminds us, but the trick is learning how to find the ghost lurking in every machine.

**T**he modern study of the intersection of race and technology has its roots in the 1990s, when tech utopianism clashed with the racism of tech culture. As the Internet grew into a massive nexus for commerce and leisure and became the heart of modern industry, the ills of tech workplaces manifested themselves online in chat rooms, message boards, and multiplayer video games that were rife with harassment and hate speech. Documenting these instances, a range of scholars, activists, and politicians attempted to combat these ills, but with little success. When the Simon Wiesenthal Center sent letters to Internet providers in 1996 protesting the rise of neo-Nazi websites, for example, the reply it received from a representative of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a prominent tech lobby, channeled a now commonplace mantra: “The best response is always to answer bad speech with more speech.” Similarly, media studies researcher Lisa Nakamura documented a dismissive comment in a study of the online game *LambdaMOO*. In response to a failed community petition to curb racial harassment, a detractor countered, “Well, who knows my race unless I tell them? If race isn’t important [then] why mention it? If you want to get in somebody’s face with your race then perhaps you deserve a bit of flak.”

*Race After Technology* belongs to this earlier tradition of protest and scholarship—books like the seminal collections *Race in Cyberspace* and *Communities in Cyberspace*—that responded to this dismissive environment by documenting the way the Internet altered and entrenched conventions around

## Race After Technology

*Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*

By Ruha Benjamin

Polity. 172 pp. \$19.95

race and identity, as well as the way those shifts were dictated by the characteristics of different online spaces. From Byron Burkhalter exploring how the people in Usenet newsgroups relied on a host of conversational quirks and specialized knowledge to discern the race of other users to Judith Donath examining how online handles and signatures communicated the personalities and identities of their authors, these early texts made the now obvious case that the Internet was shaped by the larger world—for better and worse.

In *Race After Technology*, however, Benjamin expands this insight, examining not only the emergence of a racist Internet but also how it is produced by a tech sector and a set of commercial products (online and off-) that are themselves shaped by historical prejudices, biases, and inequalities. An anthropologist and sociologist by training, Benjamin has specialized in research on biotechnology and race. Her first book, *People’s Science*, explored a California stem cell initiative that silenced poor and disabled research subjects despite ostensibly being designed to recognize their concerns. She has applied her interest in the gaps between scientific ideals and practice to a wide range of subjects, like egg donation and biased algorithms, for outlets such as *HuffPost*, *The Guardian*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. *Race After Technology* bridges Benjamin’s research and her broader interest in increasing the public’s literacy in tech. Less rooted in a particular type of technology, the book focuses on the practices and rhetoric that shape how issues concerning race—in artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms, and data collection—are treated across the tech sector.

The prevalence of secondary sources in *Race After Technology* can make the book feel more like a literature review than a focused thesis, but things snap into focus as Benjamin trains her roving eye on recurring forms across technologies, particularly codes, which in her telling encompass programming languages as well as names, addresses, and hashtags. Codes, she warns, “act as narratives” and “operate within powerful systems of meaning that render some

things visible, others invisible, and create a vast array of distortions and dangers.”

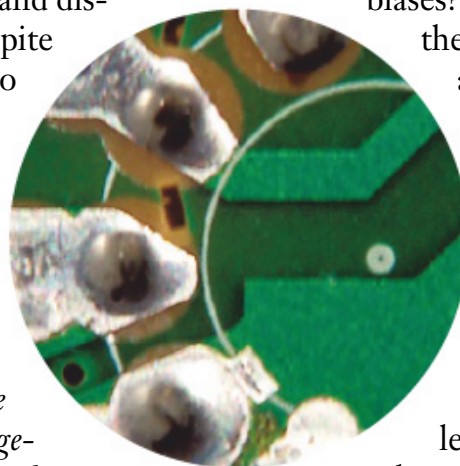
Benjamin’s social and technical definition of codes serves as one of the book’s cruxes. Her interest isn’t simply to catalog all the oppressive tech out there; her goal is to make the dangers of tech legible, to teach us how to read technology through the lenses of history and experience.

**T**o make clear how today’s technologies channel the heinous social systems of the past, she riffs on Michelle Alexander’s notion that we are living in a new era of Jim Crow. For her, racism is not just an untold chapter in the story of technology; it’s a constant presence, a leitmotif. Like Alexander, who coined the term “New Jim Crow” to accentuate the manner in which the carceral state was built from an existing racist blueprint under the auspices of neutrality and fairness, Benjamin uses hers to underline how central bias is in seemingly objective technological systems.

Benjamin makes her case by answering a set of questions in each chapter. Can robots, AI, and algorithms be racist? Yes. Are discriminatory “glitches” mistakes? No. Do unbiased technologies free us from our biases? Of course not. She grounds

these assertions in wide-ranging arguments that reveal interesting patterns across a variety of contexts. To explain how computer programs perpetuate racism, for example, she looked at Beauty AI, a 2016 beauty pageant judged by a then-pioneering machine learning algorithm. Developed

by a company based in Australia and Hong Kong, the algorithm strongly preferred contestants with lighter skin color, choosing only six nonwhite winners out of thousands of applicants and leaving its creators confused. “The robots did not like people with darker skin,” they said matter-of-factly. Instead of dismissing the makers of Beauty AI outright, Benjamin looks to the deep learning process that produced the algorithm, in which the software was set up to sort photos in accordance with labeled images tagged with information on face symmetry, wrinkles, skin color, and other factors. Those labels, she notes, were encoded with biases about what defines beauty, tainting Beauty AI from the start. If deep learning is a theory of the mind, as Mark Zuckerberg claims, Benjamin asks, “Whose mind is it modeled on?”





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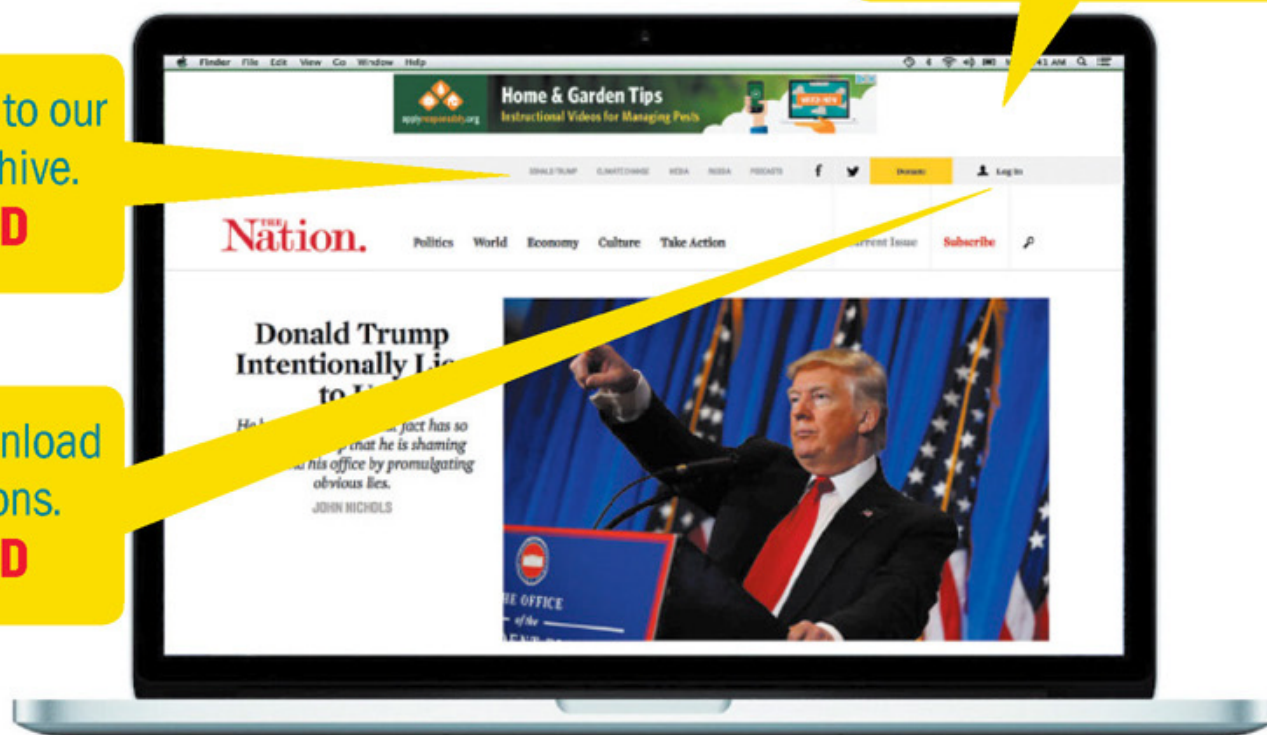
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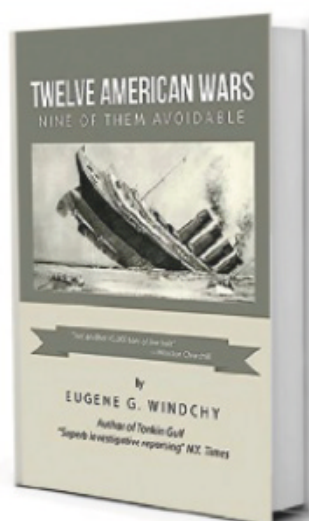
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by **EUGENE G. WINDCHY**  
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That question resonates as she examines other technologies that rely on questionable input. Discussing automated soap dispensers, which viral videos have shown to be unresponsive to hands that have darker skin tones, Benjamin moves intuitively from a technical explanation to a historical one:

Near infrared technology requires light to bounce back from the user and activate the sensor, so skin with more melanin, absorbing as it does more light, does not trigger the sensor. But this strictly technical account says nothing about why this particular sensor was used, whether there are other options, which recognize a broader spectrum of skin tones, and how this problem was overlooked during development and testing.... Like segregated water fountains of a previous era, the discriminatory soap dispenser offers a window onto a wider social terrain.

What's instructive here is how the human and mechanical components of the dispenser intermix in ways that only reaffirm existing inequalities: From the human comes the machines that then change human life.

Soap dispensers are, of course, only one part of everyday life, and for farther-reaching systems, such as predictive policing software that assigns recidivism risk scores to parolees, Benjamin highlights how much their metrics rely on tainted data. "Institutional racism, past and present, is the precondition for the carceral technologies that underpin the US penal system," she writes. "At every stage of the process—from policing, sentencing, and imprisonment to parole—automated risk assessments are employed." Again, her interest is in the social history of technology. If risk scores are built on data derived from excessive stop-and-frisks, racialized sentencing disparities, and targeted dragnets like the ones Benjamin saw growing up in Crenshaw, they can only exacerbate the justice system's existing biases. This example is more theoretical than her deconstruction of the soap dispenser, but it speaks to the same issue: How can a technology correct the mistakes of the past when those mistakes are built into its design?

These cases illustrate how expansive tech criticism can be when outcomes and effects are privileged over intentions, and *Race After Technology* is at its liveliest when Benjamin is zipping across milieus, connecting disparate technologies, move-

ments, politics, and social systems. As she puts it in one arresting passage about the broader historical context and implications of Black Lives Matter:

The Movement for Black Lives is implicitly an *anti-eugenics* movement. The aim is not just to stop premature deaths that result from police violence but to foster economic, social, and political power and resources that will sustain Black life more broadly. Fostering life, in turn, requires reckoning with the multiple ways science and technology can expose people to death—from Dr. Marion J. Sims' experiments carried out on anesthetized enslaved women and designed to hone gynecological techniques, to then President Barack Obama's 563 drone strikes that killed hundreds.

Benjamin convincingly makes this move from the affirmation of life embedded in Black Lives Matter to its negation in drone warfare and scientific racism. The links here are both rhetorical and real. Black Lives Matter, birthed during the Obama presidency, has organized around the disproportionately high black maternal death rate, but as the movement grew, it also took its cues from abroad. The consequences of Obama's deployment of police and military force abroad influenced how Black Lives Matter organized against police abuses at home, in cities like Baltimore, Dallas, and Ferguson, Mo., that have infamously militarized police forces. In moments like this, the capacious humanitarianism at the heart of Benjamin's project comes to the fore: The pursuit of digital equality is a global project.

**W**hat's refreshing about *Race After Technology* is that it's clearly written to preempt any attempts to downplay or avoid tech's deep-seated inequalities. Instead of dragging tech titans like Zuckerberg, who once used a virtual reality (VR) headset to visit a disaster site, or academics like John McWhorter, who dismissed the notion of discriminatory design by saying, "No one at Google giggled while intentionally programming its software to mislabel black people," Benjamin changes the rules of engagement. While she speaks frankly of companies like Facebook and Amazon, which "encode judgments into technical systems but claim that the racist results of their designs are entirely exterior to the encoding process," she concentrates on their actions and practices rather than their stated beliefs. There



are no supervillain tech bros in her account, no evil cabals of trolls launching denial-of-service strikes from the Dark Web, no innocent bots corrupted by the inherent evils of Twitter. There's just prejudice and its pernicious adaptability.

Benjamin's powerful argument helps us probe the inequalities under the surface of everyday technology and forces us to build a politics that focuses on not just the Silicon Valley robber barons but on society as a whole. Instead of reducing discriminatory tech to individual pathologies, she emphasizes processes and convergences that cut across all of American culture and economics. As often as she points out the homogeneity of the makers of discriminatory tech, she also notes that the inequality this tech produces is a structural problem far more than a personal one. In fact, in her shrewd telling, the homogeneity of race and gender in the tech sector can easily mask others—such as shared methods and educational backgrounds among coworkers—that reinforce today's hierarchies:

We could expect a Black programmer, immersed as she is in the same systems of racial meaning and economic expediency as the rest of her co-workers, to code software in a way that perpetuates racial stereotypes. Or, even if she is aware and desires to intervene, will she be able to exercise the power to do so?

What Benjamin is reminding us is that the inequalities that technologies produce are sociological and political as well as cultural. Diversity can characterize a work environment while shrouding the mechanisms of decision-making therein. It may be unlikely, but if the management is all white, a team of black programmers is just as capable of anti-black racism as a white one.

This is an important point and answers a question that music critic Anupa Mistry recently raised in an essay for *Pitchfork* about incorporating a structural analysis into any representational politics. Is identity-based art radical, she asked, if a marginalized group creates it but it does not articulate or explore an accompanying politics? Or as she put it, "Is the representation that feeds the content mill really just a catfish?" As both Mistry and Benjamin note, if we're not confronting power and systems, nothing is going to change.

Benjamin recognizes that confronting power and systems is not going to be easy. In discussing programs that use VR vocational training to prepare incarcerated

people for the labor market after their sentences are served, she notes that this seemingly innovative tech fails to address an existing deterrent for convicts seeking work: background checks. "The labor market is already shaped by a technology that seeks to sort out those who are convicted, or even arrested, regardless of race," she observes. "When such technological fixes are used by employers to make hiring decisions in the name of efficiency, there is little opportunity for a former felon, including those who have used VR [vocational training], to garner the empathy of an employer." Likewise, the health care practice of hot-spotting, which uses geographic data to allocate resources to areas with more high-needs patients, may appear to address disparities in the quality and cost of health care. But as Benjamin writes, in its naive use of geographic data and a top-down definition of "high needs," hot-spotting often employs the logic of racial profiling and is

yet one more hindrance to creating a more egalitarian health care system.

What's ultimately distinctive about *Race After Technology* is that its withering critiques of the present are so galvanizing. The field Benjamin maps is treacherous and phantasmic, full of obstacles and trip wires whose strength lies in their invisibility. But each time she pries open a black box, linking the present to some horrific past, the future feels more open-ended, more mutable. As a category, too, technology is equally mutable, giving activists and users who have struggled to repair broken systems new ways of understanding how discrimination is manifested. This is perhaps Benjamin's greatest feat in the book: Her inventive and wide-ranging analyses remind us that as much as we try to purge ourselves from our tools and view them as external to our flaws, they are always extensions of us. As exacting a worldview as that is, it is also inclusive and hopeful. What happens in Crenshaw matters everywhere. ■

## I used a tool to reach...

I used a tool to reach a tool I used  
to make a tool I used to make  
a metaphysics. The crows, those rocket scientists,  
those medieval scholars, were exhaustively doing  
and knowing the heavy spatial world, writing  
their summa, scolding us, singing while dreaming,  
knowing foe from friend. I used the body to make  
beliefs I used to renounce others I spoke to in words  
I thieved from trash and made further rips  
in the system and I went on flying with a slice.

BRUCE SMITH





# BUT WHERE CAN WE SHELTER?

A new book examines the deep roots of the United States' housing crisis

by **RACHEL M. COHEN**

**A**fter the fifth debate of the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, *The Washington Post* published one of its infamous fact-checks highlighting those moments when, in the paper's estimation, someone got too loose with the truth. Among the 10 claims flagged by the *Post* was Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders's remark that the United States has "500,000 people sleeping out on the street." This statement was "exaggerated," the *Post* admonished, because while it's true that in 2018 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimated that there were

553,000 people experiencing homelessness in America, not all of them were technically on the streets; some 360,000 were in shelters or transitional housing.

Putting aside that many experts believe HUD grossly undercounts the homeless, the *Post*'s finger-wagging exemplified some of the peak absurdities of America's housing crisis. The United States is the richest country in the world, but millions of its people struggle to afford housing or find it at all. Instead of ensuring that there are enough units in areas where people want to live, we've dawdled for decades and made excuses for why things can't be different—or even claimed they really aren't so bad.

*Golden Gates*, a new book on the housing crisis by *New York Times* reporter Conor

Dougherty, dives straight into these problems, skillfully exploring everything from the yes in my backyard (YIMBY) movement, which promotes more housing development, to anti-gentrification activism, the normalization of homelessness, and the factors that have made it so prohibitively expensive to build anything new. It's the latest addition to a slate of books on housing that have come out over the past few years, including Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*, Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*, Ben Austen's *High-Risers*, Matthew L. Schuerman's *Newcomers*, and Peter Moskowitz's *How to Kill a City*. These books have explored various aspects of housing discrimination, especially the burdens borne by the nation's poor and people of

*Rachel M. Cohen is a freelance journalist who has written for The Intercept, The Washington Post, and The Atlantic, among other places.*



color, but Dougherty's is among the first to look squarely at the politics of trying to respond to this disaster. By examining the inertia and ineffectiveness of political leaders who largely agree on what needs to be done, he makes a sobering case for how and why our politics have failed. While not so much a book of specific policy prescriptions, *Golden Gates* helps clarify why we have a housing crisis in the first place.

**A**s suggested by the title, *Golden Gates* focuses on California, especially on San Francisco, where the housing troubles are particularly extreme. California has the distinction of having one of the highest housing costs in the nation and some of the highest-paying jobs. It also has, using HUD's metric, more than 150,000 people experiencing homelessness—far more than any other state in the country. But California's problems, Dougherty insists, are not anomalous: They are merely “an exaggerated example of the geographic inequalities” that we see in almost every American city as urban centers grapple with the increasing concentration of economic opportunity and the rising cost of living near it. As higher-paying industries like tech and consulting consolidate in and around a few dense areas and as lower-paying retail and health care jobs replace those in manufacturing, the competition to find housing near the good-paying jobs has grown more acute.

To tell this story of housing scarcity and political inaction, Dougherty focuses on a diverse set of people, including Jesshill Love, a longtime Bay Area landlord wrestling with how to raise rents, and Rafael Avendaño, the director of a youth center who tries to teach teenagers in Redwood City how to fight their evictions. We hear from housing developers like Dennis O'Brien and Rick Holliday about the byzantine barriers they face to build more homes and from state Senator Scott Wiener, who has struggled to get his housing reform bills approved. And we hear quite a bit from leaders in the YIMBY movement, like the teacher turned housing activist Sonja Trauss, who moved to the Bay Area in 2011. Since then, the Bay Area has created roughly eight new jobs for every new housing unit, far beyond the 1.5 jobs per new unit recommended by planners. Trauss and her fellow YIMBYs want more homes built, arguing that the shortage in metro areas with highly sought-after jobs has led to soaring rents and home prices and justified fears of displacement.

## Golden Gates

*Fighting for Housing in America*

By Conor Dougherty

Penguin Press. 288 pp. \$28

**O**ne of the most sobering aspects of Dougherty's narrative comes from his historical findings. Many people are familiar with the current affordability crisis in San Francisco, which is often blamed on greedy tech CEOs and venture capitalists. But fewer are aware of its deeper roots. Digging through the archives, Dougherty shows just how long California leaders have been aware of the housing crisis that the state faced if it didn't alter course. “Changing San Francisco Is Foreseen as a Haven for Wealthy and Childless,” read one *New York Times* headline in 1981. Two years earlier, an MIT urban planning professor blasted the Bay Area for its “arrogant” and “self-serving” land-use policies and traced how developers were routinely stymied by environmentalists and homeowners opposed to new people moving in. Delivering a 1981 commencement speech at UC Berkeley, the university's top economics student warned that the Bay Area's housing shortage would result in sharply rising prices and that homeowners were likely to keep fighting any efforts to address that.

The commencement speaker was right, yet too little was done in the years that followed. This lack of reform around land use was largely rooted in the failure of leaders to take on entrenched interests who profited from the status quo—from the investors, developers, and building trades to the homeowners who were fortunate enough to move to a desirable area first.

Today politicians are trying to tackle these structural problems more directly. Policy analysts say California needs to build 3.5 million homes to get serious about solving its housing crisis, and in 2017, California Governor Gavin Newsom committed to reaching this goal by 2025. But this is a tremendous task that would necessitate building roughly 500,000 units a year, when over the past decade, on average, fewer than 80,000 homes were built in the state annually. And there are, as Dougherty observes, considerable impediments that stand in the way, including soaring costs for construction and land. The cost of building a 100-unit affordable housing project in California had increased from \$265,000 per unit in 2000 to almost \$425,000 by 2016. And that's an average. In cities like San Francisco, it can cost upward of \$850,000

to build a single subsidized unit. When California's legislature passed a \$4 billion bond to build affordable housing in 2017, it was hailed as a serious step forward, one that would amount to a nearly \$12 billion effort when paired with private money. But \$12 billion divided by \$425,000 equals just 28,235 units, or 0.8 percent of the 3.5 million goal. As Dougherty writes, “This sort of math could make a joke of any new funding effort.”

Voters across California have been more supportive of new funding packages for affordable housing over the past few years, but the quiet dread among advocates is that once the public realizes how little effect each influx of money has on the crisis, their appetite for new taxes might wane. “Behind each new affordable housing bond and the additional billions for homeless services was a public who thought they were being generous, when really the new taxes were nothing in comparison to a problem that was getting worse faster than cities could deploy the money,” Dougherty writes.

**W**hile the political leaders in Sacramento and on city councils continue to squabble, renters are doing what they can to organize, and Dougherty gives voice to their experiences too. In particular, we hear from teenager Stephanie Gutierrez, who studied every Tuesday night with other community members how to protest gentrification and eviction. One day, Gutierrez returned home to discover that her family's rent would be jumping by 45 percent.

Gutierrez and the activists she worked with did their best to raise hell. “*No hay peor lucha que la que no se hace*,” another tenant insisted—there is no worse fight than the one that isn't fought. But Dougherty doesn't sugarcoat the hurdles that renters face. “Protests could make [housing] flips more expensive, but not nearly by enough,” he writes. Despite the occasional bad headlines, developers saw easy opportunities to make more money, and landlords were well within their legal rights to raise rents.

Dougherty also follows the YIMBY activists as they mobilize for new subsidized and market-rate housing. Their build-everything philosophy often pits them against anti-gentrification groups, which view new for-profit development as housing policy moving in the wrong direction. But activists like Trauss insist that more housing will help reduce prices for everyone by relieving pressure on strained markets.



Dougherty is sympathetic to this argument, but he also notes some of the real limits faced by these mostly white, highly educated activists as they struggle to build a multiracial and cross-class movement.

Perhaps one reason Dougherty is more sympathetic to the YIMBY movement is that unlike many others, it has been more willing to confront the reality that you can't stop people from moving to dense, crowded cities, no matter how much you wish they'd stay away. As Wiener, who is aligned with the YIMBYs, once vented, "There is a strain of self-described progressive politics in San Francisco that says: 'Lock down the city'.... Don't build more housing—just lock it down, and maybe if we dig a moat

around the city and put crocodiles in it we can just stop people from coming."

**D**espite finding some hope in local activism, Dougherty doesn't end his book on a particularly optimistic note. The rising costs to build, the increasing polarization, and the failure to take on entrenched special interests, he suggests, could leave California in much the same place it has long been. And yet he writes that there is growing momentum on the legislative level, not just in California but across the country. Since 2017, rent-control bills and ballot initiatives have cropped up in roughly a dozen states, and in February 2019, Oregon became the first to

pass rent control statewide. In June 2019, New York legislators beefed up rent control for nearly 1 million apartments in New York City, and California approved statewide rent control a few months later. Meanwhile, the Minneapolis City Council voted to end single-family zoning, a measure intended to boost the housing supply, and Oregon shortly followed suit. In the DC area, where planners say at least 320,000 new units are needed in the next decade to accommodate demand and population growth, lawmakers are considering measures to expand rent control and reduce barriers to construction.

Yet a crucial question in *Golden Gates* remains unanswered: What can governments do to help those who need housing now without enacting policies that could make the situation worse in the long term, whether by exacerbating displacement and segregation or by contributing to an even more severe shortage down the road?

Some new housing ideas have emerged recently on the left, such as building more housing that would be kept off the market for speculation and profit entirely. The homes guarantee movement, launched in September 2019, seeks to do for housing what Medicare for All would do for health care. While some homes guarantee advocates object to the idea of expanding Section 8 vouchers because they'd like to reduce reliance on the private rental market, others maintain that these policies are not necessarily in conflict with each other. In fact, Sanders campaigned on both a homes guarantee and making Section 8 vouchers available to all who are eligible. "Mixed solutions can feel like a cop-out," Dougherty writes, "especially in polarized times. And yet, over and over, in city after city, it's always where people end up and what seems most likely to work."

He has a point. To move forward, movements will have to find ways to break out of their particular communities and build strength across class lines. In other cases, activists and political leaders might need, as was the case with Medicare for All, to find new language to address existing policy demands. One think tank in Seattle tested YIMBY messaging and found that the word "homes" worked better than "development" and the phrase "walkable and convenient" was more appealing than "density." In Minneapolis a YIMBY group has opted for the warmer name Neighbors for More Neighbors. These are all worthwhile steps, but the politics won't be solved by friendlier rhetoric alone. To build more housing, we'll need to build more power. ■

## Bodies & Water

I think about my kneecaps, my ear canal, the slight webbing between toes & fingers; I think about brown bodies, my body; how my belly ebbs & sinks & floats & calms in water; I think about black bodies, about statistics, how 65% of black American children cannot swim; 60 for Latinx children; 79 from low income families. How statistics hold history in the sharp end of a tack; my brother & me thrown out of swim lessons for *causing trouble*; limbs reach & tread, lacking *know*-how; how a statistic takes a term like *access*, wads it into a crumpled shape, in search of any receptacle other than a docket; our cells contain wet & wombing history of sea & salt in our nervous systems; our cells crave water & in turn crave equity; no magic equation exists to explain why what's *made* of water *wants* water; no need. The human body consists of organs & tissues & hydrogen & calcium & sodium & chlorine & water & water & water & water. Why must my water offend your water? Fuck your count of my offensive features—labia, mustache, mammary glands, black hair on my nipples, thoughts in my cranium, uterus, hopes sewn in cerebrum, words readied at tongue—you dominate narrative: a scratched record caught in dilapidated loop, white noise that coats ammonia down my throat to attempt erasure; history of *attempts*. You cannot remove water from water, sea from sea.

FELICIA ZAMORA



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# IN A STORM

The return of Fiona Apple

by RUMAAN ALAM

**T**he first time I heard Fiona Apple, all she had to say for herself was that she'd been a bad, bad girl: "Heaven help me for the way I am / Save me from these evil deeds before I get them done." "Criminal" sounded like the pop hit it soon became in the 1990s, an introduction not to a person but to a persona. The artist's manufactured image (wary chanteuse for that heroin chic micromoment) was subverted by her innate

ability—that beyond-her-years contralto, lyrics that unwound with an unpredictable logic. Her debut, *Tidal*, released in 1996, is juvenilia (she was 18!), and though Apple has spent the ensuing years racing away from that persona, she'll never outrun it, nor should she wish to.

At her most creatively fertile, Joni Mitchell released a masterpiece a year. Apple is no less urgent or searching, but she needs more time. Three years after *Tidal*, there was *When the Pawn...* (the full title a long poem), then 2005's *Extraordinary Machine*, then 2012's *The Idler Wheel...* (the

full title is 23 words), and now, eight years on, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*.

One cannot chart this rake's progress by an album's evolving concerns, because those do not change for her. The albums are soundtracks, with a meaning particular to the person listening. Her fans' feelings about the work have to do with the moment at which they found it. Because Apple is always reassuringly herself. The jaunty piano, tamed with aplomb; that voice, less sweet with age and maybe the better for it; lyrics that read like middling verse—something my teen self would have

Rumaan Alam's third novel, *Leave the World Behind*, will be published in October.



inscribed in my history notebook—but delivered with brio. Take “Extraordinary Machine”: “I seem to you to seek a new disaster every day / You deem me due to clean my view and be at peace and lay / I mean to prove, I mean to move in my own way and say / I’ve been getting along for long before you came into the play.”

You need to hear it—the staccato, show-tune delivery, the way she lands on the rhymes, including that embedded “way,” then gives that last contraction a pretty little flourish. And that “I” is key. In the mature albums (her last three), Apple is not contrite for being a bad, bad girl; she wants to reveal the more complex truth.

“I know I’m a mess he don’t wanna clean up,” she sings in “Paper Bag.” “I’m a frightened, fickle person / Fighting, cryin’, kickin’, cursin’ / What should I do?” she laments on “A Better Version of Me.” “Oh, when I try to love / I can love the same man in the same bed in the same city / But not in the same room. It’s a pity,” she sings on “Left Alone.” I think we misunderstand this as confessional, as we often do with women. Maybe “autofictional” is the word we want—Apple burnishing the stuff of her life into art. Still, the excitement that attends the arrival of *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* is the frisson of seeing an old friend.

A recent *New Yorker* profile explained that the album’s title was borrowed from a cop show, but its meaning is clear: “Fetch the bolt cutters, I’ve been in here too long.” You must take Apple at her word. She is ready for liberation. But there’s a disconnect, the lamentation of being silenced from an artist who has, for half her life, so publicly articulated who she is. Maybe she means it this time, or perhaps she had never said what she meant. Or this is the persona she (and we) are most invested in. This is the Apple we demand to see.

Thematically, *Fetch* is familiar. An unruly self (“Kick me under the table all you want / I won’t shut up”), negotiating the line between idiosyncrasy and mental illness (“People like us, we play / With a heavy balloon / We keep it up, to keep the devil at bay, but it always / Falls way too soon”), with so much love to give (“When you resist me, hon, I / Cease to exist, because I / Only like the way I look when / Looking through your eyes”). She’s that friend—the oversharer who tells a great story, the unlucky in love who’s always willing to give it another shot, the wicked gossip who makes you laugh but whom you

respect and fear in equal measure. It’s wonderful to be back in her company again.

Musically, *Fetch* astonishes, the work of an artist absolutely confident in the experiment she’s conducting, her objective aligning happily with the listener’s pleasure. This is a true rarity: the artistic advancement that offers joy or surprise or comfort. (I thought of Mitchell’s *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* or Björk’s *Vespertine* or David Bowie’s *Station to Station*.) The album’s tactics—heavy beats, cut-and-paste vocal play—might frustrate some who prefer Apple’s earlier work, waltzy and cutting.

Apple’s ambition is evident from the opening—Casio drum!—of “I Want You to Love Me.” The jokey beat ripens into a lush cascade of piano and the admission “Next year, it’ll be clear / This was only leading me to that / And by that time, I hope that / You love me.” It could be the ballad at the center of a Broadway show’s first act, but it is not. Drums thunder; Apple’s voice grows thin, out of breath, then resolves into a Yoko Ono chirrup.

The drums are a portent. We’ve heard this before, notably on “Hot Knife,” from *The Idler Wheel*, mostly timpani and the artist’s voice. Instead of teasing and flirting, this record pulses and lives. Sometimes the drums are rollicking (“Shameika”), sometimes martial (“Relay”), sometimes jazzy (“Ladies”), sometimes manic (“For Her”). Of course, the piano, with which Apple is most associated, is but a different kind of percussion instrument.

Apple’s vocal ability hasn’t changed, though she is less intent on singing prettily. (She does that, too; “Under the Table” and “Ladies” show her at her most polished.) But throughout the album, she explores, layering her vocals one over the other so that they echo as long-distance phone calls once did. She lets them trip almost out of sync with the music or blur into abstraction. (“Relay” closes with a spectral postscript: “I used to go to the Ferris wheel every morning just to throw my anger out the door.”) Indeed, sometimes she speaks more than she sings, as on the title track, which eventually lifts into an homage to Kate Bush. “I need to run up that hill,” she declares. “I will, I will, I will,

I will.” Then her dogs start barking—the hounds of love, so to speak.

There has always been a discomfiting intimacy to Apple’s albums. She’s so unguarded, telling us all these things we believe to be about her. Here, that quality is underscored by the record’s rawness; it sounds like an album made at home, as it in fact was. It’s not just the recurring pet sounds (which some people will find charming): You can sense the space around the performers, and you feel like a lurker or eavesdropper. Childlike handclaps echo in a room you can picture if you close your eyes. You can truly hear Apple’s voice, when it’s being pretty and when it’s being human.

Her particular magic is in her lyrical ingenuity and how her nimble phrasing manages to get to every word, racing the percussion but not taking all her breath. She’s an extraordinary lyricist, with a flair for the odd detail. In “Shameika,” her paean to a maybe bully from her school days, Apple sings, “In class I passed the time / Drawing a slash for every time the second hand went by / A group of five / Done

12 times was a minute / But / Shameika said I had potential.” It tumbles out of her with its own strange logic.

Apple sings a coy taunt to a lover—“Check out that rack of his, look at that row of guitar necks / Lined up like eager fil- lies, outstretched like legs of Rockettes”—then twists it. “They don’t know what they are in for, and they don’t care, but I do / I thought you would wail on me like you wail on them, but it was just a coochie-coo-coo.” There’s a maturity here, or maybe I’m wrong; that *New Yorker* profile pointed out that Apple’s lyrics contain snippets written in her youth, as with the refrain from “Relay”: “Evil is a relay sport, when the one who’s burned turns to pass the torch.” Not too shabby for a kid of 15.

But Apple’s not a kid anymore. At 42, she can reclaim an old insult, marrying it to one of her assets: “I’m pissed off, funny, and warm / I’m a good man in a storm.” That is exactly why we adore her. The best song here (perhaps in her entire oeuvre) is the first. Loud, naked, confident, it is the artist not as prodigy but as genius. It’s only the title—“I Want You to Love Me”—that rings false. By now, Fiona Apple should know that we do. ■





# Q&A KEITH ELLISON

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison on May 31 took over the prosecution of the Minneapolis police officer charged with murdering George Floyd, an

unarmed black man whose death in police custody sparked a national outcry. Three days later, Ellison's office upgraded the murder charge against the officer who had knelt on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, and it charged three other officers with aiding and abetting second-degree murder. Ellison, a former Congressional Progressive Caucus cochair, has a record of addressing police violence and now brings legal rigor and moral clarity to the prosecution of police brutality. Shortly before he took charge of the investigation, Ellison said that he believes the United States is at a critical juncture where policing might finally change. Here are key sections of the interview. —John Nichols

**JN: You've been outspoken for years about police brutality. Let's start by putting in context what's happening.**

**KE:** The police are now and have always been in place to maintain the legal/social order. If that's a just social order, that's one thing. If it's one based on slavery, Jim Crow segregation, capital and Big Business abusing labor, then the police have always played this role where they are the ones who sort of maintain that social hierarchy....

The question is, why do these cases so often result in either no charge, no grand jury bill of in-

dictment like in the Mike Brown case [in Ferguson, Mo.], no conviction, hung juries? I mean, we all saw what happened to Philando Castile—live on Facebook—who was shot down by Officer Jeronimo Yanez [in Falcon Heights, Minn.], and yet there was no conviction in that case. It's just almost impossible to imagine it wouldn't have resulted in a conviction, but it didn't. Or what about Freddie Gray? Perfectly healthy. They throw him in that [Baltimore police] van, and he [ends up] dead, and next thing you know, all these officers are charged, and yet no one is held accountable for the death of Freddie Gray. There's got to be some element of complicity and culpability on behalf of the system that sends the officers out there.

**JN: There's impunity.**

**KE:** Impunity is one of the benchmarks of how police engage with, clearly, communities of color but also low-income white communities, working-class white communities. You look at the history of it, it's very much there. There's no doubt that there's a disproportionate number of people of color impacted negatively by police-community engagements, but the fact that we don't talk about the white victims means that we racialize

this thing to the point that there are people who don't think that it's a prevailing American problem. It is!

**JN: Can this be a turning point?**

**KE:** Yes, I really do think it can be. But that, by no means, is a foregone conclusion. It all depends on the leadership we can exercise now. And what that means is that we've got to put forward ideas and mobilize around them at a time when hearts and minds are open for systemic reform.

**JN: You're talking about societal change.**

**KE:** Yeah. Now, there are some who will say, "Well, until we change society, we can't change policing." Absolutely untrue. We've got to start with police....

This is a political matter, and it needs to become a political

issue. [Joe] Biden needs to come up with a very clear set of ideas based on [Barack] Obama's ideas of 21st century policing. That was a good document. Let's build on that.

**JN: Attorneys general across the country—certainly the enlightened ones—can play a real role in this as well. You've got some ideas about what they can do to reform things.**

**KE:** One of the things is the bully pulpit. You're a statewide officeholder. You have to speak about just and humane policing and police accountability and police transparency. You can do that even before you think about representing any state agency, before you file a single lawsuit, before you prosecute a single case. Think about your role as just a moral voice in the state that elected you. ■

*"Now, there are some who will say, 'Well, until we change society, we can't change policing.' Absolutely untrue. We've got to start with the police."*





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